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Romantic Miscalculations On Dating Applications: Definitions And Experiences Of Mobile Dating Micro-Rejection

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ROMANTIC MISCALCULATION ON DATING APPLICATIONS: DEFINITIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF MOBILE DATING MICRO-REJECTION

by

SEAN KOLHOFF

DISSERTATION

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of Wayne State University,
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MAJOR: Communication

Approved By:

______________________________
Advisor

______________________________
Date
DEDICATION

To the mobile daters I interviewed, whether in this project or others, whose persistence inspired my project.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Mobile dating application users are presented many opportunities to develop romantic relationships, but previous research has illustrated how few attempts at relationship formation end in success (Knapp, 1978; Sunnafrank, 1986). Whether due to incompatibility, mismatched interests, or an unwillingness to invest time into a relationship, people use distancing strategies to end developing relationships. These efforts to end a relationship are almost always enacted unilaterally (LeFebvre, Allen, Rasner, Garstad, Wilms, & Parrish, 2019), and these “break-ups” can be emotionally distressing for receivers. However, new technology for initiating romantic relationships and receiving rejection may hold important implications for the way heterosexual dating application users encounter and interpret relationship rejection.

Recently, the development of mobile communication technology and the proliferation of smartphones has created more opportunities for people to communicate and an expectation that they will always be available to do so (Ling, 2004). Within the mobile communication ecosystem, dating applications have become a tool frequently used to initiate romantic relationships. Mobile dating applications (MDAs) that are downloaded to personal mobile devices help facilitate romantic dating through location-based features (Quiroz, 2013). The development of new smartphones with integrated GPS functions and fast cellular networks have been key to the proliferation and adoption of MDAs (Gudelunas, 2012; Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016). Though previous studies have illustrated how strategies for romantic relationship initiation, maintenance, and dissolution are frequently influenced by changes in mobile technology (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Hall & Baym, 2011; LeFebvre, 2017a), in this study, I examine how the affordances of MDAs and implicit theories of romance can affect a user’s perceptions and interpretations of romantic rejection.

There are many MDAs that have been developed to cater to various demographics of mobile users and their dating interests. Examples of apps that have been frequently covered in popular media and previous research are Grindr, Tinder, and Bumble. Grindr was one of the earliest mobile dating apps, and it is frequently used by men looking for men as romantic partners around their current location (Corriero & Tong, 2016; Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016). With Grindr, users can create profiles and share short text-based self-descriptions that are visible to other daters in the network (Corriero & Tong, 2016). Opening a dating
app like Grindr on a mobile device causes the application to upload the user’s current geographic location to its servers. This information is used by the app to calculate the physical proximity between users and inform a dater that there are potential partners in their area (Toch & Levi, 2013). Some apps like Grindr also have an “appear online” notification which allows users within the network to message other online users and arrange dates (Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016). While daters’ interactions may eventually move off the application, the chat function within the app is a key feature that facilitates relationship initiation and development.

Likewise, Tinder is one of the most well-known dating applications and has the largest daily active user base (Wilkelman, 2018). Similar to Grindr, users create a profile and connect information from other social networks to Tinder, choose photographs to display, and create a short-text bio (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018). However, unlike Grindr, which displays potential partners on a map with their proximity (Toch & Levi, 2013), Tinder shows users an assortment of others’ profiles that are within a defined radius of their current location. This feature leads to Tinder’s classification as a location-based real-time dating application (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018). As a user goes through their day, for example commuting between work and home, they will likely be presented with different potential dates at each location. If two users on Tinder decide to accept each other the system will notify them that they have a match and allow them to send text messages to each other within the application (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018).

Bumble has many features that are similar to Tinder, such as creating a profile and finding potential matches using geolocation data. However, a significant difference is its focus on changing existing heteronormative dating behaviors (Taner & Tabo, 2018). Bumble has tried to change gendered relationship initiation dynamics through its design by requiring women make the “first move” by contacting men they are interested in. Within the Bumble app, text-based conversations between matched users must be initiated by women; and men can be reported if they send aggressive message or sexually explicit images to their matches (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Duguay, 2017). The end goal of these features is to create a dating experience that is “100 percent feminist” and more friendly to women (Bumble, 2017).

These applications position themselves as a way for users to find romantic partners with specific demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, and location, as well as sexual cultures and preferences, such as people only interested in casual sex versus those interested in long-term relationships (Duguay,
Burgess, & Light, 2017). As these apps attracted users in the 2010s, articles in the popular media framed these dating networks as an extension of “hookup culture” that threatened to disintegrate longstanding relationship practices, led to a rise in sexually transmitted diseases, enabled men to have “no-strings-attached” sex with as many women as they like, and left female MDA users disappointed and loveless (for examples see Goldman, 2015; Sales, 2015). However, despite these depictions of MDAs, users were attracted to them because these apps presented an entertaining, new opportunity to develop romantic relationships, find love, and seek partners away from the influences of their in-person social networks (Rosenfield, Thomas, & Hausen, 2019; Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017).

Starting in 2013, meeting prospective relationship partners through MDAs and websites displaced meeting through friends as the primary way heterosexual Americans approached dating (Rosenfield, et al., 2019). Since then, the utilization of MDAs has continued to increase. 48% of adults between 18 and 29 have used some form of dating site or application (Anderson, Vogels, & Turner, 2020). Men and women utilize MDAs at approximately the same rate (with 32% of men and 28% of women reporting they have used online dating), and daters are equally likely to adopt MDAs across racial and ethnic groups (Anderson, et al., 2020). Even though the number of adults who have dated, formed a committed relationship, and even married someone they met online has increased over time so to have the negative experiences reported by MDA users.

About 70% of online daters think it is common to lie on a dating site or app to appear more desirable to other people within the platform (Anderson, et al., 2020). This willingness to lie could be related to the value individuals within these sites place on perceived similarity between interests (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018); daters in these spaces are more likely to find others attractive if they share interests, hobbies, and relationship goals (Anderson, et al., 2020). Some users have also experienced negative communicative interactions within these spaces, such as continued contact from a rejected partner after expressing a lack of interest, unwanted sexually explicit images and messages, being called offensive names, and threats of physical harm (Vogels, 2020). Across the board, women under 30 are more likely to experience these negative interactions than any other segment of the MDA population (Anderson, et al., 2020; Vogels, 2020). However, even with these negative behaviors and media portrayals of online dating, approximately half of American adults contend these practices have not had a positive or negative effect on dating or
relationships (Anderson, et al., 2020). Within these userbases, a majority of online daters believe they have had positive experiences overall (Vogels, 2020).

While the three examples of popular MDAs discussed above have different target audiences, they share similar features and processes that are common to most dating apps (these processes are illustrated in Figure 1). Markowitz, Hancock, and Tong (2018) outline the overall process of mediated romantic relationship initiation as a series of stages. First, users must create a profile to display themselves to potential dates (Markowitz et al., 2018). Features of the profile vary by application; profiles can involve connecting to other social networking sites, uploading photographs, and completing a free-response section to express potential areas of common interests (LeFebvre, 2017a). After a profile has been created, daters then have the option of connecting with others by evaluating potential dates based on their shared data, common interests, and personal characteristics during a profile review in the next stage (Markowitz, et al., 2018).

When in the matching stage, the MDA’s location-based features are combined with a user’s self-selected partner preferences and geographic search parameters to generate a list of potential dates. The user can scroll through these potential matches, read others’ personal bios, and view their photos to determine if they want to connect with that match, or reject the opportunity (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018). For example, on Tinder, a user will make a swipe gesture towards the right side of their mobile device

**Figure 1.1: Stage model of mediated relationship development**

[Diagram of Stage model of mediated relationship development]

- **Stage One:** Mobile Dating Application Profile Creation
  - Evaluate profiles of other users
  - Signal interest in future interaction

- **Stage Two:** Discovery Phase
  - Users notified of mutual interest
  - Text messages exchanged within the application

- **Decision to meet face-to-face**
- **Rejection**
screen if they want to communicate with that person in the future and left if they do not. If two users express mutual interest in each other they transition into the discovery phase where they seek information about potential partners and begin to exchange text messages to communicate through the application (Markowitz, et al., 2018). The conversations that occur during the discovery phase of relationship initiation play an important role in whether a potential date is rejected or if the pair will continue interacting and eventually decide to meet face-to-face. Romantic rejection often occurs in the discovery phase because it is the first opportunity for two matched daters to interact directly. Previous research on stage models of interpersonal communication have detailed that few face-to-face relationships make it past introductions and initial conversations (Knapp, 1978). Likewise, because a mobile dater has many opportunities to enter the discovery phase with other MDA users, there is a greater likelihood that few of these connections made on the application develop into lasting romantic relationships.

While users may download MDAs to facilitate a greater number and frequency of romantic contacts, just having the MDA installed does not guarantee that users will find lasting romantic love. In the context of romantic communication, these MDAs lead to an increase in connectivity and facilitate more frequent relationship initiation requests between potential partners, but they also create more opportunities for romantic rejection and refusal. While many people are initially enthusiastic at the prospect of using an MDA, continued use may invite both the fleeting excitement of romantic match notifications and the emotional impact of being rejected and ignored by most of those matches (Vo, 2019).

The affordances of MDAs allow for romantic rejection to be communicated in various ways. Specific, direct messages sent to a receiver may indicate an unwillingness to interact in the future. But romantic rejection in MDAs may also occur through more passive means, such as ghosting, defined as a unilateral decision to end communication, withdraw from an individual, and prompt relationship dissolution using at least one technological medium (LeFebvre, 2017b). Approximately 25% of mobile daters report that they have been ghosted, and 20% have ghosted others (Freedman, Powell, Le, & Williams, 2018). Being rejected through an extended silent treatment in offline contexts has been previously found to elicit feelings of pain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004), threaten an individual's self-esteem (Williams, 2007), and increase anger and sadness (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Williams, 2009). Even though ghosting is a
well-known practice within mobile dating, it is not often endorsed as an empathetic relationship termination strategy by MDA users (Freedman, et al., 2018).

While ghosting has recently been the focus of scholarly attention, other forms of rejection experienced by users of MDAs have also be examined. For example, Weisskirch and Delevi (2013) found that text messages are frequently used to communicate refusal. Different types of mobile rejection text scripts, such as saying “Sorry, but I’m not interested” or “Thanks for going out last night. I had a good time, but felt we were missing a spark I need to pursue something further”, can let the rejected dater know there is no longer an opportunity for a relationship and prevent them from ruminating over what went wrong (Lusinski, 2015).

Although various forms of romantic rejection in MDAs have been documented in the popular press and academic literature, little research to date has identified how daters interpret and experience these contemporary forms of romantic rejection during their attempts to find potential partners through MDAs. Therefore, this dissertation will explore the implications of *mobile dating rejection*, or daters’ experiences of rejection that occur through MDAs during failed attempts at romantic relationship initiation. Specifically, this project will examine the mobile dating rejection experiences of heterosexual MDA users between 18 and 25.

Individuals in this age range are ideal for this research project because they often integrate new technology into their relational communication practices (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011). Moreover, 94% of this group have a smartphone capable of supporting the use of mobile applications (Pew Research, 2018), and they frequently report using mobile dating services (Anderson, et al; 2020; Smith, 2016). However, as people in this age-range develop romantic relationships, they often have fewer relational scripts and less structured relationships (Stanley et al., 2011). As a result, the relationships they develop are often less stable and prone to turbulence (Fincham & Cui, 2011). Previous studies have illustrated that these internal prototypes of what a relationship “should be” are related to an individual’s *implicit theories of relationships*, a concept that I introduce in the sections below.

**Implicit Theories and Rejection**

*Implicit theories*, or naïve assumptions about human attributes that structure the way individuals react to the actions and outcomes of others (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995), approach relationship formation
(Knee, 1998), and perceive rejection experiences. An individual’s implicit theories are constructs formed from their personal beliefs and assumptions used to form attributions and understand the behaviors of others. For example, people who believe in an entity implicit theory would contend that traits like athletic ability are fixed, while those holding an incremental theory would argue that athletic ability can be developed (Dweck, et al., 1995). These implicit theories have been shown to govern a person’s inferences, judgements, and reactions, especially in the face of negative life events (Dweck, et al., 1995). Continuing the above example, individuals with an entity mindset who lose a race may blame it on “being slow”, but those who view the world with the incremental theory may see their loss as a result of ineffective training before the race. While these theories are often seen in an individual’s general approach to life, they have also been examined in specific contexts such as romantic relationships (Canavello & Crocker, 2011; Knee, Patrick, & Lonsberry, 2003).

Research on implicit theories and romantic relationships has illustrated that these mindsets are directly related to an individual’s general perceptions, intentions, and behaviors within relationships (Freedman, et al., 2018; Knee, 1998). As an example, within relationships people may have a destiny or growth mindset. Those with destiny beliefs think that a relationship will either work or fail, whereas individuals with growth beliefs are prone to think that relationships are malleable and can change over time through communication and overcoming relational obstacles (Knee, 1998). Past research has shown that people who have strong growth beliefs are often better equipped to handle relational conflict and develop strong coping strategies in times of relational stress, while those with destiny beliefs pay more attention to the negative characteristics of their partner if they feel they are no longer “soul mates” (Franiuk, Pomerantz, & Cohen, 2004; Knee, Patrick, Vietor, & Neighbors, 2004). While these theories have mostly been examined in face-to-face relational settings, they may play a role in the strategies MDA users employ to understand and process rejection within apps as well.

**Rejection and Mobile Communication Technology**

While past research has illustrated how individual factors can influence perceptions of face-to-face rejection, few studies have identified the communicative techniques used by mobile daters to reject potential partners within dating applications (see for exception Morgan, 2012; LeFebvre 2017b; LeFebvre, et al., 2019). Younger adults frequently integrate new technologies into their relationship rejection approaches
and have previously been found to utilize mobile communication (specifically SMS text messaging) to break up with romantic partners (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013). Mediated channels of communication may be chosen by daters because the technology provides different affordances for rejection than face-to-face interactions.

Affordances—broadly described as possibilities for action—are the “multifaceted relational structure” (Faraj & Azad, 2012, p. 254) between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context. The possible affordances of an object are therefore based on the subjective perceptions of individuals using it (Schrock, 2015). For example, an MDA could provide users with multiple possible affordances, but an individual user’s interpretations of the MDA can determine which of the potential capabilities he or she uses effectively (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). These interpretations of an affordance are also tied to the specific user’s goals (Schrock, 2015) and individual traits or person-level characteristics, such as their perceptions and identity (Hogan, 2009; Nagy & Neff, 2015).

Various perceived MDA affordances may affect the way receivers experience rejection. As noted above, when seeking out potential dates and engaging in conversations users of MDAs must create profiles. However, being able to effectively create a profile within the MDA is connected to a user’s understanding of what these various tools and features are providing to them within the app itself. As an example, dating applications can afford users a sense of visibility, or the ability to be easily seen within a network (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Effectively crafting a short bio and uploading images that further self-presentation goals can help a user stand out and maximize the affordance of visibility; however, utilizing these MDA features poorly could cause a user to be filtered out by the dating applications algorithm or ignored by other users, resulting in reduced visibility (Cook, 2017).

Clearly, affordances like visibility that are embedded in the architecture of MDAs have the potential to influence users’ experience of romantic rejection. However, such affordances will only affect rejection responses when they are fully perceived and activated by users—the extent to which daters are aware of and use these various affordances, is unknown. Therefore, this project will aim to better understand how rejection experiences of mobile daters are shaped by their perception and use of MDA affordances, as well as their own implicit theories.
MDAs provide new and unforeseen ways for daters to experience rejection. For example, daters who do not move past signaling their own interest at the matching stage, and thus do not move into the discovery phase (where they are notified about mutual interest), may interpret that lack of mutual interest within the network as a form of rejection by other MDA users. Within mobile dating, rejection decisions are frequently based on characteristics observed on the profile of a potential partner during the matching stage before any direct interaction takes place (Markowitz, et al., 2018). Previous research in face-to-face relationship initiation also echoes that first impressions are important. Displaying attractive physical attributes and providing information on a profile to reduce uncertainty are beneficial relationship development strategies that help transition a relationship from initiation to lasting interpersonal bonds (Knapp, 1978; Sunnafrank, 1986).

Furthermore, understanding what to include in a dating app profile could also be tied to the dater’s perception of visibility affordances within the MDA. Thus, daters who spend long periods of time using an MDA without entering the discovery phase with matches could interpret this experience as a sense of rejection. This could be especially likely if they expected that using an MDA would lead to positive relational outcomes, or if a dater had prior expectations that they would have more frequent matches. Even though users might only experience explicit romantic rejection during their discovery phase interactions, there may be an indirect sensation of rejection that occurs from the lack of available matches to communicate with. Additionally, experiencing underwhelming match results could also lead to differential outcomes; daters might consider if their self-presentation needs to be changed in order to be accepted by other daters, or indirect rejection could potentially persuade dissatisfied daters that MDAs have little utility, motivating them to leave these spaces altogether.

**Overview of the Current Study**

To better understand the rejection encountered by mobile daters, qualitative research methods will be used to investigate what types of rejections heterosexual mobile daters encounter within dating applications (RQ1) and how heterosexual daters’ experience mobile dating rejection (RQ2). Qualitative research methods can often be useful when applying contemporary theories of interpersonal communication to new environments (e.g., Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006).
To address these research questions, I will begin first by explaining the process of mobile dating and how daters may experience rejection at different stages of that process, along with a review of existing literature on mobile affordances (Chapter 2). I then offer background on romantic rejection research—specifically reviewing how daters’ implicit theories and predicted outcomes may influence their perceptions and experiences of rejection (Chapter 3). Then, I will introduce and summarize how key concepts within interpersonal communication and social psychology were used as sensitizing frameworks to guide the development of the interview questions and qualitative analysis used in this project (Chapter 4). This will be followed by a discussion of the findings of this project (Chapter 5). I will conclude by drawing implications between the use of mobile dating technology and rejection within romantic relationships (Chapter 6).
CHAPTER 2: MOBILE DATING AND AFFORDANCES

The use of mobile dating applications (MDAs) as a tool to create romantic connections has increased as mobile phone use has diffused across the globe (Schmitz & Zillmann, 2016). These applications are often referred to in scholarly literature as “location-based-real-time dating applications”, “proximity dating applications”, or “people-nearby applications”. While these labels are often used interchangeably, on balance, MDAs have had an impact on the way daters use technology to develop their romantic relationships.

Over the last decade, the popularity of MDAs has increased dramatically. Mobile dating is projected to grow to 310 million users, or about 20% of online singles around the world, actively using these applications by 2020 (Rapier, 2018). Currently, 70% of global users fall between the ages of 16 and 34, and 62% of MDA users are men (Smith & Anderson, 2016). Additionally, over a 10-year period between 2003 and 2013 the number of Americans from 18 to 24 using MDAs increased from 5% to 22% (Smith, 2016). Of those people using MDAs, 12% disclosed that they were currently in a relationship with someone they met online (Lin, 2019). The use of MDAs is even more popular in smaller, niche segments of the dating community, with 37% of same-sex couples reporting that they met their current partner through online or mobile dating services (Brown, 2019).

The integration of MDAs into modern dating practices may be connected to the interaction between their perceived affordances and the goals of users. New technology is often used to facilitate relationship development (Tong, Hancock, & Slatcher, 2016); however, as MDA users rely on features and affordances of mobile technology to search for and select their potential partners, they are also using those features and affordances to develop new, innovative strategies for relationship rejection (LeFebvre, 2017b). To explore this interaction between users and technology, this chapter will begin with an overview of the process of mobile dating followed by a definition of the different affordances within MDAs. This chapter then concludes with a description of how the perceptions and goals of users may interact with MDA affordances when experiencing romantic rejection.

Process of Mobile Dating

While there are many different types of MDAs available to download around the world, they typically follow similar stages involving profile generation, discovering potential partners, and escalating in-
application *conversations* to other channels. To begin using a downloaded MDA, users must create a profile to display themselves to potential dates (Markowitz et al., 2018). The profile creation stage in MDAs is often designed to be a quick process that allows the user immediate access to the matching features of the application. Visual images are the focus of profiles and take up a larger proportion of the profile’s interface than text-based biographical information (Yeo & Fung, 2018). In this stage, MDA users have the goal of self-presenting their best physical attributes, personality features, and interests to other daters in the MDA network to make a good impression and spark others’ romantic interest (Markowitz, et al., 2018). At the profile creation stage, many users strategically embellish their personal characteristics to manage their impression and project an attractive self-image (Ellison, et al., 2006; Markowitz & Hancock, 2018).

To facilitate a sense of user *authenticity*, many MDAs supplement users’ self-submitted images and self-authored text with other embedded features that connect the MDA profiles to a user’s existing social network platforms like Facebook and Instagram. This integration allows users to present themselves through images they have previously tailored to fit their social media impression management goals (Ward, 2017). For example, the consistency between the images displayed on an individual’s Instagram and Tinder can create a sense of authenticity through a comparison of multiple areas of that individual’s online self-presentation that later translates to predictions of their offline presence (Duguay, 2017). When users link their dating application profile by connecting it to another social network, the MDA often displays some sort of symbol on the user’s profile to alert others that the profile has been “verified” (Duguay, 2017). Mobile daters want to make sure the person they may eventually meet in person is the same individual they are talking to online, and these symbols of verification may ease concerns about misrepresentation and safety at the profile stage (Duguay, 2017).

After daters have had a chance to complete their profile information, they begin to look through potential dates and review their profiles. In the matching phase, many MDAs rely on haptic features, such as swipes on a touch screen, to signal interest. The most well-known haptic gestures in mobile dating are the ones used within Bumble and Tinder. In these MDAs, users indicate they are interested in another dater’s profile by swiping right or up on the displayed image; swiping left indicates rejection. During this *matching* phase, users may be defining their relationship goals, and thinking of ways to best fulfill them by searching for short-term or long-term relationship partners (Sumter, et al., 2017). Despite perceptions that
MDAs are used solely to initiate short-term “hook-ups”, the motivation to find love on an MDA has been shown to be stronger than the motivation for casual sex, especially for women (Sumter, et al., 2017). To fulfil these relational goals, daters evaluate others’ profiles looking for common interests and attractive individual characteristics (Markowitz, et al., 2018). Often, decisions in the matching phase are motivated by first impressions of physical appearance (Finkel, 2015); as a result, daters’ choices may be tied to the design of MDAs, or specifically to the reliance on visual images. These images impact mate selection strategies (Taubert, Van der Bung, & Alais, 2016), and contribute to perceptions that MDA mate selection processes are a series of low-stakes decisions related of the volume of potential partners available within the applications (D’Angelo & Toma, 2017). This low-stakes setting can also lead to perceptions that any subsequent MDA interactions that take place in the discovery phase are built on shallow and superficial judgments of physical attractiveness (Finkel, 2015; Yeo & Fung, 2018).

If two users express mutual interest in each other and form a match, they then transition into the discovery phase and seek information about their newfound partners through communication. This phase is where users begin to exchange text messages and communicate through MDAs (Markowitz, et al., 2018; Ward, 2017). Most conversations that occur during these initial exchanges within MDAs are between 30 to 60 characters in length, and typical interactions only have three messages per conversation (Zhang & Yasseri, 2016). These messages are used to find out more information and determine if daters are willing to escalate the relationship. This escalation could include talking over more channels, such as phone calls, texting, communicating on other applications (Parks, 2017), or transitioning to a face-to-face meeting (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017).

While the relational goals that mobile daters reference when screening potential dates serve as the starting point for the discovery phase, the communication strategies employed by matched daters also influences the trajectory of these initial MDA interactions. Some users deceive others during the discovery phase to maintain their self-presentation and strategically achieve relationship goals (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018). The deceptions in this phase manifest as lies about physical attributes, lies about being unavailable to meet in-person, or deceptions to prevent future interactions with others within the application itself.

Lies about physical attributes are connected to a user’s attempt to maintain the self-presented image developed for their user profile (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018). Other deceptions rely on the
asynchronous nature of mobile messages to strategically ignore or time responses to exert or maintain control over an interaction (Zhang & Yasseri, 2016). These deceptions explicitly rely on understanding the constraints and affordances of mobile technology, and they are used to provide misinformation about activities, beliefs, and proximity to the other mobile dater to appear (un)available (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018). These kinds of lies have been shown to help users manage impressions and their availability with little fear of being discovered by their conversation partner, but overall, MDA users try to avoid using deception during these early discovery-phase conversations because being caught in a lie is detrimental to long-term relational development. (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018). In other words, getting caught using deceptive strategies could lead to romantic rejection.

**Defining Romantic Rejection in Mobile Dating Applications**

*Rejection* (Leary, 2005) is typically defined as a declaration by an individual or group that they do not (or no longer) want to interact or be in the company of the rejectee. In the context of romantic relationships, rejection is often a major interpersonal event, such as a breakup or dissolution of a relationship (Howe & Dweck, 2016). Rejection has been frequently studied in the context of face-to-face interactions. In Chapter 3, I provide a deeper review of past face-to-face rejection research and how individuals’ implicit theories about romance may influence their experiences of rejection in MDAs; here, I introduce some foundational concepts regarding rejection, generally.

Previous research on stage models of interpersonal communication have detailed that rejection is common in the initial phases of relational development, with few face-to-face relationships progressing past introductory conversations (Knapp, 1978). Individuals rarely have the available motivation, time, and energy to develop every potential interaction into a close romantic relationship. Relationships that do progress past acquaintanceship often do so because the individuals in the interaction perceive high degrees of similarity on personal attitudes and backgrounds (Sunnafrank, 1988). However, this development towards a relationship only occurs if an individual considers the predicted rewards of any future relationship to be greater than their potential costs, such as being rejected or hurt by the prospective partner (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004; Sunnafrank, 1986).

While previous research on rejection has examined its presence in face-to-face initiation, the context of rejection and how it is perceived may also have an important impact on rejectees. The rise of
MDAs suggests that more conversations—and more rejection—are occurring regularly across different points within the MDA process. Furthermore, even though people might not expect every MDA match or conversation to lead to a face-to-face date, the perceptions of MDAs as avenues for quickly facilitating romance may result in more negative outcomes, including short-term hurt feelings over so many failed attempts and rejections, or longer-term frustrations at not achieving their relationship goals of finding romantic love (Sumter, et al., 2017). Over time these repeated instances of rejection within MDAs could produce an additive effect that impacts the behaviors of rejected mobile daters within these channels and their perceptions of the utility of these spaces (Vo, 2019).

These varied dimensions and instances of romantic rejection experienced in the early stages of romantic relationship development on MDAs are distinct from past theoretical conceptualizations of rejection that have been applied by researchers studying dyads in developed, face-to-face romantic or interpersonal relationships where rejection is more synonymous with divorce, break-up, or separation after a longer-term partnership (e.g., Baxter, 1984). It is possible that interpersonal setbacks can be just as severe after experiencing a large rejection event, such as a divorce or a break-up, or a smaller rejection event, like feeling a “romantic spark” and then finding out the other person is not interested, depending on the implicit theories held by rejected daters (Howe & Dweck, 2016). Experiencing any form of rejection could be damaging emotionally as rejectees worry that similar rejections will occur in the future (Howe & Dweck, 2016). With as many as 300 million daters as potential targets of romantic rejection in MDAs, understanding how mobile technology may alter the experience and effects of romantic rejection in relationship formation is an important topic that warrants further investigation.

**Affordances and Mobile Dating Applications**

New technologies are often included in relationship development, and MDAs may be adopted by daters because the technology provides new and exciting ways to interact with potential relationship partners (Sumter, et al., 2017). However, the different affordances within mobile communication may impact how MDA users perceive and experience rejection. These differences may impact their ability to recover from instances of interpersonal rejection and influence their future attempts to foster relationships within these applications. In the next section, I will outline the origins of the affordance concept before explaining
and defining the key affordances that exist in MDAs. I conclude this section by theorizing how each affordance may impact daters’ interpretations and experiences of rejection within MDAs.

**Defining the affordance framework.** The term *affordance* has been used in previous research to explain the interaction between features of technologies and the subjective perceptions of individuals. Broadly, an affordance is a possibility for action in a “multifaceted relational structure” (Faraj & Azad, 2012, p. 254) between an object (technology) and the user. This relationship between users and technology can often enable or constrain potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context. In this project specifically, I argue that the affordances of MDAs could impact performances and perceptions of romantic rejection.

The conceptualization of affordances originally comes from Gibson’s (1979; 1986) research on the perceived utility of an object drawn from environmental cues. This utility is directly tied to the “ways in which an actor, or set of actors, perceives and uses [an] object” (Gibson, 1986, p. 145). Contemporary research in the social sciences has expanded upon this concept of affordances and emphasized the relational interaction between an object and the individual user’s perceptions (Parchoma, 2014). In this conceptualization, the affordance perspective can be used by researchers to identify how a single technological innovation can result in a multitude of possible outcomes for various users (Schrock, 2015).

Even though the affordances an object provides are not guaranteed but are rather potential capabilities related to the interpretation of individuals (Majchrzak, et al., 2013), the outcomes are tied to the features of a specific technology. As a result, the possibilities of what can happen after using technology are finite and stable (Hogan, 2009). In communication research specifically, the affordances framework has been used to identify how affordances “set limits on what it is possible to do with, around, or via the artefact” (Hutchby, 2001, p. 453).

However, as research on affordances has increased in various fields, the use of the term has become inconsistent (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2016). This has led researchers to identify definitional criteria and theoretical conceptualizations to better capture affordances as a product of interacting with technology and not specific features or characteristics of objects (Evans, et al., 2016; Nagy & Neff, 2015). Three criteria were developed to determine if the application of the affordance framework is appropriate to the context being studied. A supposed affordance should (1) not be presented as a feature of a technology,
(2) not be presented as an outcome of technology use, and (3) the purported relationship between the technology and the user should have variability (Evans, et al., 2016).

Affordances are not specific to any singular technology. Instead, they are based on the relationship a person or user forms from their perceptions of an object—in this case, a mobile dating app. For example, a camera is a feature of a smartphone object, and those who observe and use it are provided with an affordance of recordability to preserve moments of their life (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Distinguishing affordances from specific technologies is important because different objects may be designed with common features, but users will vary on how they perceive each object's associated affordances. For example, kitchen knives have similar features such as handles and blades, but users may contend that a knife can facilitate various purposes including cutting meat, dicing vegetables, slicing bread, or even self-defense.

Second, an affordance should lead to potential outcomes and invite behaviors without being a result of using an object (Withagen, de Poel, Araújo, & Pepping, 2012). For example, if a social media user has a goal to locate an old tweet from their favorite celebrity it could be argued that Twitter affords searching for and viewing posts by individuals. Because the platform has search tools that allow users the opportunity to find this content, Twitter affords a sense of searchability and visibility for the information seeker, but the presence of this content could be impacted by many features and factors—such as privacy settings, content deletion, or even misspellings on the Twitter account search bar. The affordance is a means to achieve a goal, but it is not the outcome. Instead, an affordance serves as the relational link between objects, users, and outcomes (Evans, et al., 2016). Importantly, this means that this relational link should be able to lead to multiple outcomes. For example, visibility may not just be tied to finding a tweet but also monitoring the activities of other users online. The means and the object may remain the same, but the changes in the outcomes and goals are tied to users and their behaviors.

These different possibilities for action are tied to the third criterion of affordances. An affordance should have variability. The utilization of an affordance is based on the perception of that affordance (Schrock, 2015), and as a result, individuals should arrive at a range of possible outcomes even when their devices have the same features (Evans, et al., 2016). For example, although the same features are available to every user within a platform each individual user can utilize features differently to increase or
decrease their visibility. Facebook users can use the platform’s security features to prevent themselves from showing up in other users’ search results and they can choose who can see the information they share in the social network. Likewise, modern smartphones have geolocation features embedded to help users navigate through their daily lives, but some users may perceive sharing their location through these features as a breach of their personal privacy. Individuals make different decisions when approaching an affordance based on their relationship with the technology, subjective perceptions, and desired goals.

These three criteria provide a strong foundation to evaluate the utilization of an affordance. While there are many possible affordances that emerge from utilizing technology, this research project will focus on five affordances that have a strong connection to MDAs: availability, locatability, portability, multimediality, and visibility.

**Availability.** Availability is the degree to which individuals experience perpetual contact between themselves and others in their network (Schrock, 2015). This affordance is directly related to mobile device features like push notifications and individual desires to remain connected to their devices because of a fear of missing an opportunity to develop a new relationship. Overall, mobile devices have increased availability by allowing users to transcend temporal and geographic constraints when using a connected digital device (Fox & McEwan, 2017). The greater connectivity and convenience of mobile communication has created new opportunities for interaction between people around the world; however, people must also manage how available they make themselves through their mobile devices.

Individuals navigate their level of availability in relation to their goals and perceived ability to manage technological features to fit their desired level of connection (Schrock, 2015; Light & Cassidy, 2014). While mobile communication can provide a mechanism to enhance well-being and maintain relationships, being permanently available can cause self-control conflicts that delay other activities (Halfmann & Reiger, 2019). Certain users are better at balancing these social pressures of connection. For example, teenagers have been found to function as “networked individuals” who can turn their friendship networks on and off at any given moment (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). People’s efficacy for technology use can also help them manage their availability; for example, people who disable read receipts on their mobile text-based channels can manage their availability, but only if they have the knowledge and efficacy to manage such features (Halfmann & Reiger, 2019).
Other users can have difficulty trying to find a balance between meeting social pressures and personal satisfaction, as opting out of mobile communication is not always an option due to the cultural expectation that mobile devices are “always on” and the normalization of smartphone use (Ling, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). The diffusion of smartphones has led to a strong cultural expectation of hyper coordination: a feeling of imprisonment connected to having a mobile device (Ling, 2004). Because a mobile phone can connect to anyone no matter where they are, there is a societal expectation to constantly keep others informed about our lives (Ling, 2004). This individual sensation of perpetual connection and availability strongly contrasts with the asynchronous nature of mobile interactions.

As mobile communication continues to evolve, the affordance of availability—and by extension perpetual connection—will continue to be shaped by changing features, norms, expectations, and emotions surrounding the use of smartphones (Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016). This can be clearly seen in the way mobile daters interact with each other within their applications. In mobile dating, availability is reflected in a user’s time spent on the application, usage of messaging features, and personal mobile app notification settings (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017). Many MDAs have notifications that encourage users to interact with each other as soon as they indicate interest in each other, such as Tinder’s “it’s a match!” notification.

A higher level of availability may be tied to other outcomes or constraints on the user such as feelings of information overload, immense competition for matches, attention, and distraction from life outside the application (Marcus, 2016). However, mobile daters who take advantage of the afforded availability of mobile dating may have more spontaneous conversations if they immediately respond to MDA notifications and start interacting with a potential partner (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017). Availability is often a double-edged sword. Without some degree of availability users would not be actively engaged in mobile dating, but too much availability could cause stress for MDA users.

At a certain point, MDA users may decide to remove themselves from the applications entirely as a way to manage availability and feelings of hyper coordination. However, removing themselves from an MDA is not always a straightforward process. Brubaker, Ananny, and Crawford (2016) explain that leaving mobile dating apps is a gradual, cyclical process that is punctuated by periods of use and disuse. Users often renegotiate their time spent on the app depending on their satisfaction with interactions they are having. Feeling like conversations are a “waste of time” may lead people towards deleting an application
altogether (Brubaker, et al., 2016). People choose to leave these applications because they no longer want to be contacted through them, but many return to MDAs at a later time if they imagine they will have positive future experiences.

**Locatability.** The affordance of *locatability* refers to the degree to which users can use their device to share their physical location (Gillespie, Osserian, & Cheesman, 2018). This affordance is related to many mobile device features that help users, consciously or unconsciously, share their location such as high-speed mobile network connections, Wi-Fi internet, or integrated geolocation through GPS. After GPS accuracy restrictions were lifted in the 2000s, software developers were able to leverage the GPS capabilities of mobile phones to create new location-based services and mobile social networks (Goggin, 2011; Wilson, 2012). MDAs have taken advantage of this by allowing users the ability to find other individuals using the application within a defined geographic area.

Those who develop strategies to utilize locatability discover new ways to form relationships and engage in place-making activities (De Souza e Silva & Firth, 2012). For example, Foursquare users can “check in” to a location only when they are in its physical proximity, and those who take advantage of these features achieve social coordination goals within their networks (Hayes, Carr, & Wohn, 2016). Although smartphones have features for users to call or text their friends when they arrive at a location, the locatability affordance provided through applications like Foursquare allowed them to communicate their location in a different way and facilitate a connection between a physical space and a digitally networked community. Within MDA use, this new overlapping of information from physical and digital spaces can give users increased feelings of immediacy when communicating with others through their dating apps (Duguay, 2017).

For mobile daters, the feeling of immediacy facilitated by the locatability affordance is referred to as *mobile intimacy*. Mobile intimacy is the process of overlaying a physical space with a persistent electronic social space through the use of MDAs. These overlapping social spaces follow the user wherever they take their smartphone and rely on the geolocative features of modern mobile devices to function (Hjorth, 2013). Many MDAs incorporate geolocation data, and through locatability create a sense of mobile intimacy where users are directed towards potential partners in a localized geographic area around their current location (Duguay, 2017). Geolocation data can be empowering for users, especially when stigmatized individuals,
such as gay men, are trying to find dating partners (Duguay, et al., 2017). This affordance can allow users to quickly and conveniently use their mobile device to find other users, and a potential date, in their nearby geographic area while rapidly transitioning from in-app conversations to face-to-face meetings (Quiroz, 2013).

However, despite the advantages of utilizing location features in mobile dating there are many users who are concerned that location tracking features and the collection of sensitive user data can lead to privacy risks (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017). Many of the features within MDAs require the user to implement certain geographic parameters, such as Tinder’s settings that only allow daters to search for potential matches within a specific geographic radius (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017). These settings are often negotiated by users based on their own goals and perceptions of privacy. For example, users who are concerned about sharing their location with people may set their matching radius to four or five miles to only see MDA users in their local area. Although a higher degree of locatability could benefit relationship initiation, users who are concerned about privacy threats connected to constantly sharing their geolocation data may place themselves in a vicious cycle where they want to make connections on an MDA but are quickly running out of potential matches within such a confined geographical search area.

Yet, even if users only allow themselves an opportunity to find a match in a small geographic area they may be able to rectify this issue by changing the physical location in which they use the MDA. After all, mobile devices can be easily moved between areas. This interaction makes the affordance of locatability interconnected to the affordance of portability, or a user’s ability to connect to the mobile applications features whenever they have Wi-Fi or a cellular data connection. Hogan (2009) notes that affordances can often be used in combination, and in the case of location-based real-time dating applications (LBRTD) these features that facilitate locatability are tied to the ability to use the application outside of a stationary computer. For example, a user with a cell phone but no data plan cannot use Tinder unless connected to Wi-Fi. In this instance, the experience of the mobile dater is somewhat similar to that of the traditional online dater; however, by moving between locations with Wi-Fi throughout the day the MDA user can find new potential matches. While this person may have limited portability, they can still take advantage of the locatability affordances of mobile dating.
**Portability.** Portability as an affordance is connected to the ease of using technology while on the move (Schrock, 2015). Portability is often evaluated based on physical characteristics of a device, like its size and weight, and considerations related to the use of the technology, such as battery life (Schrock, 2015). Mobile phones provide portability by their nature, as they allow a user to move through the world while remaining connected (Arnold, 2003). This sense of connection is not just limited to the technical features of the device itself, but also tied to the applications installed on to it.

Smartphones and tablets provide MDA users an opportunity to connect in public, private, and semi-public spaces, unlike either face-to-face dating or traditional web-based dating sites that are confined to a desktop or laptop (Lutz & Ranzini, 2017). This ability to communicate across different spaces is why the content shared through a smartphone is just as portable as the device itself. Messages shared through a mobile phone are also considered portable because they can be accessed whenever the user has a cellular connection (Fox & Potocki, 2014). Mobile message systems within smartphones allow users to get in touch with people wherever they are (Vanden Abeele, Schouten, & Antheunis, 2017), and these features of smartphones have been leveraged by MDA developers to encourage the rapid exchange of messages and application utilization.

From an application standpoint, portability is connected to the mobile system’s ease of use while on the move and the demands on the battery of the smartphone. To that effect, most MDAs fill the screen with visual information and encourage users to make quick initial evaluations that transition into messaging within the application (Markowitz, et al., 2018). Interactions on mobile applications are often convenient and lead to an amplified volume, scale, and fluidity of activity (Mavin, 2013). Moreover, the portability of dating apps has often been cited as one of the factors that led to a higher degree of social acceptance for using them in public spaces (Duguay, et al., 2017). Swiping through profiles can be something that occurs during a commute, at home alone, or in a social setting with friends. The open presence of mobile dating in public has challenged the previous stereotypes of online dating being exclusively for people who have difficulty initiating face-to-face relationships. Even though MDAs have seen wider adoption, the ability to use them in public and private spaces has led to its own challenges.

The portability of mobile devices has also led to their utilization in forms of sexual communication, specifically *sexting* (Fox & Potocki, 2014). *Sexting*, or the sending sexually explicit text messages and
images through a mobile device, has become an issue in MDA communication because often these messages are unsolicited. The collapse in contexts between private spaces and public spaces allows users to share explicit images and messages from their location, but the nature of portability means that users receiving these messages could be in public or semi-public spaces. Receiving these images in public could be a major violation of the sender’s expectations of appropriate communication during relationship initiation and development within the MDA.

The conceptualization of the term “mobile” is not just what is technically possible, it is also tied to what is imagined to be possible in social and cultural contexts (Alper, 2018; Nagy & Neff, 2015). In the context of mobile dating, users may imagine that sexting is flirtatious way to signal sexual or romantic interest that is facilitated through the technical features of their device and dating application (Drouin & Tobin, 2014), but many who receive these unsolicited images do not want them. In response, many MDAs are implementing features to restrict this application of the portability affordance. For example, developers are now introducing machine learning systems to MDAs that automatically blur and filter sexually explicit images in personal chats and provide receivers the opportunity to make them visible if they wish (Kan, 2019). This negotiation still allows for the possibility of sexual communication but provides safeguards for unwilling recipients.

In sum, the portability affordance illustrates that initiating romantic relationships is no longer bound by the limitations of cumbersome computing hardware (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014), the demands of face-to-face social interactions, or the separation of private and public life. Mobile dating applications allow users the possibility of real-time dating from whatever location they wish.

**Multimediality.** Multimediality is the ability to use multiple forms of communication and/or platforms within a single piece of technology (Schrock, 2015). This affordance is seen within smartphones as the ability to have multiple types of applications and forms of communication, such as texting and calling, within a device. However, multimediality can also exist within specific applications based on how they are developed.

In MDAs, multimediality can be evaluated through the features used to create profiles and communicate with users. During profile creation, many MDAs present users with the opportunity to connect their dating application profile to other existing online accounts, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Spotify.
These links can save users time during profile creation and allow them to show more about themselves without having to develop additional content (Tiffany, 2019). Moreover, these connections to external networks can help potential partners reduce uncertainty when determining the authenticity of a potential partner’s profile information (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2010).

Linking a dating application with an established photo source, such as Instagram or Facebook, can allow a user to connect existing photos to their dating application. This social media integration is often displayed in the MDA via a symbol on their dating app profile. This anchoring to other social networks allows users to maintain a previously developed impression management strategy (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018). Furthermore, this link can also provide warrants that can be interpreted by receivers when they are attempting to determine the authenticity of the potential partner’s self-presentation (DeAndrea, 2014). Warrants are used when individuals interpret the degree to which information presented online is immune to manipulation by the source it describes (DeAndrea, 2014). In the case of online dating profiles, the “source it describes” would be the MDA profile creator. While individuals within MDAs do engage in deception when creating their profiles (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018), online daters have been previously found to balance deceptions and favorable self-presentations because of their desire to move conversations from online channels to face-to-face encounters (Ellison, et al., 2006).

Mobile daters viewing profiles could use warranting cues in combination with their understanding of multimediality to help them sort and filter out potential partners during mate selection at the matching phase. For example, musical preferences connected to Spotify or an identifier that an individual attends the same university may influence perceptions about the authenticity of self-presentation claims made later in interactions within the application. However, anticipation of future interactions may constrain the degree to which receivers can accurately interpret warranting cues (DeAndrea, 2014). In other words, MDA users who find an individual attractive and value meeting them in the future may be more willing to overlook what they would usually consider red flags of authenticity and believe the self-presentation is accurate.

Multimediality may also play a role in how individuals construct messages and interact during the discovery phase. The chat features within MDAs allow users to send texts as well as images and GIFs. The decision to implement various types of communicative messages could make a difference when initiating conversations and hoping for reciprocity. Many popular articles providing advice on mobile dating stress
the importance of deviating from traditional pickup lines and taking advantage of images and GIFs to send unique conversation starters (Madhavan, 2017; Pugachevsky, 2018).

This aim to communicate over different channels is also seen in the progression of interactions in the discovery phase to conversations that move off the MDA and onto other online social networks like Snapchat and Instagram. Conversations carried out across multiple channels can increase the development speed and strength of a relationship (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Furthermore, making content from various platforms visible by integrating them into the MDA profile or exchanging different social network identifiers within interactions may provide a sense of authenticity while fostering an opportunity for relationship development.

**Visibility.** Visibility as an affordance has been previously identified as the ability to locate information about a potential partner and the degree of difficulty related to finding it (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). For example, social networking sites are considered to have a high degree of visibility as material shared on the network can often be found by non-users, such as tweets from the official President of the United States Twitter account. Meanwhile information sent through other mobile communication channels, such as text messages, have less visibility because they are directed towards specific recipients (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Mobile dating applications fall between these degrees of visibility. On one hand, the profile of a user can be seen within the MDA, but this visibility can be constrained by physical proximity, gender or partner preferences, and the amount of information shared by MDA users.

MDA users take advantage of the profile tools at their disposal to increase their visibility, allowing other mobile daters to find out information within their bios, linked social network profiles, and displayed photographs. When they log in, mobile daters are often presented with a series of user profiles within their geographic area. During matchmaking, daters quickly scroll through images of other users (Finkel, 2015). As noted above, many MDAs then allow the dater to choose to swipe left or right to indicate their interest during the matchmaking phase (Tiffany, 2019). However, swiping and selection are dependent upon a dater’s profile being visible to others.

Although many MDA matches are based on generating interest from daters’ judgments of each other’s physical attractiveness (Finkel, 2015), the expanded dating pool provides MDA users with new opportunities to be noticed. Users are aware that they are in a competitive environment, and they may
implement novel strategies to try to draw the attention of potential matches while working within the constraints of the MDA limitations, such as the length in a profile bio and number of profile images (e.g., Daetz, 2016; Lutz & Ranzini, 2017; Madhavan, 2017; Murray, 2018; Pugachevsky, 2018). For example, Tinder claims 72% of users wear a neutral color in their profile images (Tinder, 2018), and standing out by wearing a bright color in can draw attention to a dater’s profile (Pugachevsky, 2018). The arrangement of profile images, as well as their selection, are decisions made by the MDA user to show information about themselves to other daters.

Even though these applications feature images prominently, the information shared by a mobile dater in their bio is also important and read by users when they attempt to determine compatibility. Some web-based sites advise standing out by ensuring information in profile and application bios are funny and original (Madhavan, 2017). The utilization of these features improves the likelihood of success in online dating (Daetz, 2016; Murray, 2018), and can function similarly in mobile dating. Understanding how to leverage these tools to draw attention to one’s profile is directly connected to a user’s perceptions of visibility affordances within the MDA.

While the overt profile features of dating applications can afford profile visibility to individuals, MDA users may not have equal amounts of application display visibility (i.e., an equal chance of seeing each other’s profile) due to the influence of various embedded system features designed to facilitate matching among users, such as algorithms. Examples of how MDAs’ matching algorithms may limit visibility can be identified by looking at the various algorithms that have been used by Tinder. Previously, Tinder assigned an attractiveness score to each MDA user based on their utilization of profile features, in-app activity (like personal swipe and messaging frequency rates), and the attractiveness score of other daters who swiped right on their profile (Cook, 2017; Tiffany, 2019). This type of ranking has often been referred to as the Tinder user’s ELO score (Carman, 2019; Cook, 2017, Tiffany, 2019). The purpose of the ELO score was to capitalize on the similarity principle by matching people with similar levels of attractiveness. This application of the ELO score reflects how it has been used in competitive games to match players of similar skill levels (Carman, 2019). However, many people challenged the use of the ELO score in Tinder and complained that these scores were designed to keep attractive people talking to each other and force undesirable profiles to have limited options for finding matches (Carman, 2019).
Tinder claimed that it has moved away from the ELO ranking and currently uses an algorithm that recalculates a user’s available matches every 24 hours. The profiles of new potential partners are displayed based on the how the user, and other similar users in the application, swiped on profiles throughout the day (Carman, 2019; Tiffany, 2019). This system is designed to help a user find a date based on the behaviors of similar daters in their geographic area (Carman, 2019). For example, if two users have multiple matches in common, the application will likely show both of them people that have been selected by the other user and screen out those who have been rejected. While many see this system as an improvement on the ELO ranking, it still underscores the importance of the interaction between swipe behavior in the application and application display visibility. Further, it illustrates how much competition for matches exists within the MDA ecosystem.

In theory, algorithms on MDAs present users those profiles it thinks they are most likely to prefer first. Every time a potential date is rejected, the next profile is, theoretically, a “worse” option (Carman, 2017). MDA users may perceive that when they swipe left and reject an individual they will never be visible to them again, but this is not necessarily the case (Tiffany, 2019). Daters that a user rejects early on, or are “unmatched” with, are often recycled and presented again as options in later MDA sessions because they may have been liked by people with similar swipe habits (Tiffany, 2019). While this may be helpful for users who understand the function of the algorithm and are utilizing this afforded visibility to try and find a person they accidentally rejected, it could lead to other users’ frustration as they are presented a series of profiles they have already expressed their disinterest towards. This type of display visibility algorithm also implies that daters who have been rejected by similar profiles may not be prominently displayed to a new viewer.

Similarly to swiping left, the algorithms of MDAs are designed to present likely “right swipe” profiles based on the habits of other people who have liked a profile, too (Carman, 2019). Those daters who are ranked higher (and are therefore initially displayed to potential partners when they log in) may have a better understanding of how they can make themselves visible on the MDA, but being more visible does not necessarily equate to greater success with relationship initiation. This may also suggest that these more visible daters might also have more matches to address, more messages to attend to in the discovery phase, and greater experience of rejection (potentially, both sending and receiving). Additionally, MDA users are expected to be picky with their right swipes. Tinder limits the number of right swipes a user is
allowed to 100 a day and "over-swiping" can lead to users being less likely to appear to other daters within the application (Tiffany, 2019). Trying to expand one’s dating pool by swiping right on as many profiles as possible can end up hurting the dater’s long-term prospects of finding a match.

Super-likes can provide users an opportunity to interrupt the application’s algorithm and increase visibility (Tiffany, 2019). A super-like will put the swiper in the top of their target’s match queue, meaning when the target of a super-like logs in again the person who swiped-up will be the first profile they view (Carman, 2019). While this technique can make a dater more visible, the amount of super-likes an MDA user receives are limited. For example, non-paying (e.g., free) Tinder users can have one super-like a day while premium users have five (Tinder, 2019). Additional super-likes can be purchased by the application user along with optional profile boosts that affect how often a dater’s profile is shown to other users (Carman, 2019). Thus, while some MDAs allow features that circumvent visibility-constraining algorithms, these options often come with a price.

The utilization of algorithms in mobile dating highlights an important issue in the conceptualization of affordances. While Evans et al. (2016), illustrate the utilization of an affordance is tied to how people know what it is, see it, and use it, imagined affordances can also play a role in how people utilize technology. Imagined affordances are “expectations for technology that are not fully realized in conscious, rational knowledge but are nonetheless concretized or materialized in socio-technical systems” (Nagy & Neff, 2015, pg. 1). For example, an imagined affordance of visibility can lead daters to feel like they properly set up their profile to be viewed and selected by others, but they might not be aware of how visibility actually interacts with the features of a mobile dating algorithm, or how their swiping decisions impact other users (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Users are often not aware of how their behavior within the MDA can affect their likelihood of matching or initiating interactions because the information surrounding how an algorithm functions are not made visible to MDA users. The imagined affordances concept allows researchers to compare the purposeful things an application has been designed to do by developers with the perceptions of technological affordances understood by users interacting with the technology (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

Likewise, interface design features and matching algorithms of dating platforms can have an impact on relationship formation, and (by extension) rejection (Tong et al., 2016). These algorithms within dating systems may heighten dater expectations and impact date selection. This is especially true when the user
cannot see how the algorithm curates their dates. Daters who feel that they have a high amount of personal control over mate selection in a dating system can experience unrealistic levels of optimism, greater feelings of control, and more idealization of potential partners (Tong et al., 2016). Identifying if users are aware of the presence of MDA algorithms could be important to identify if users are considering these algorithms in their attempts to increase application display visibility affordances.

**Affordances and Mobile Dating Rejection**

In summary, the affordances of availability, locatability, portability, multimediality, and visibility within MDAs reviewed above have impacted how users of these applications approach initiating relationships. Availability provides users the ability to know exactly when the profile they “right swiped” has signaled their mutual interest through application notifications. The expectations related to hyper coordination (Ling, 2004) and mobile intimacy (Duguay, et al., 2017) may drive daters’ expectations of further development through immediate text-based conversations from the moment they match. Initiating romantic relationships is no longer bound by the limitations of face-to-face interaction (LeFebvre, 2017a; Hall & Baym, 2011) or cumbersome computing hardware (Birnholtz, et al., 2014). MDAs, through the affordance of locatability, allow users the possibility of real-time with those in their area dating from any location. Moreover, the portability of these MDAs combined with device location features allow users to quickly transition from matching on an application to meeting offline. The combination of visibility and multimediality allows users to strategically present themselves to other mobile daters. Linking different social network profiles to an MDA account can provide warrants and a sense of profile authenticity. Then, if and when conversations develop during the discovery phase, users are able to again take advantage of multimediality to send different kinds of mobile messages and interact over a variety of applications to escalate the initiation of their relationships.

Clearly, past work shows that MDA affordances can influence initiation processes, but these affordances can also impact the perception and experience of romantic rejection daters send and receive during that initiation process. Increasing availability by making oneself more present on the application, or looking out for notifications, may influence first impressions of mobile intimacy and increase the emotional impact of rejection (Duguay, et al., 2017). This combination of availability, portability, and locatability may lead to increased expectations of a face-to-face meetup occurring—especially if the daters are in close
physical proximity to each other when they match—and distinct feelings of rejection if such expectations are unrealized.

Users sending messages through the MDA may also have their perceptions of availability influenced by hyper coordination (Ling, 2004). MDAs encourage matched daters to quickly interact with each other, or move on to different profiles (Finkel, 2015). The high level of competition within the mobile dating pool may lead individuals enacting greater availability to feel uneasy as they await responses from the target of their romantic advance. Increased availability expectations in MDAs may urge users who are awaiting responses from mutual matches to constantly check if their message or match has been received; lack of response may be interpreted as sign of silent rejection and mounting anxiety or fear that they have been ignored by their target.

Expanding the geolocation range and increasing one’s visibility and locatability within MDAs can increase the number of potential matches within the system, but the likelihood of rejection also increases as the user encounters more profiles. Although users can set wider ranges to find more potential dates, they may be less likely to actually develop romantic relationships with those at the end of their match radius. They may experience more rejection from these distant matches because they do not have the warranting cues daters in that area are looking for, such as attendance at a local college or employer. Moreover, even though they may see the profiles of individuals at the end of their defined geographic radius, the swiped-on user may have their geographic settings presenting profiles within a smaller geographic area. This combination of locatability and portability may lead the swiper to experience a passive rejection as they continue to wait for a match notification that can only occur if their prospective partner enters an overlapping geographic radius, opens their dating application, and begins a matching session.

The variability in visibility and multimediality affordances can lead to some daters increasing their likelihood of experiencing rejection. Not including written profile content and not taking advantage of linking MDA profiles to other social media accounts could lead to passive rejection because of a lack of warranting cues within the user’s profile. During mobile interactions, multimediality, or a lack thereof, in message construction could also lead to direct rejection. Daters may differ regarding their expectations, norms, and definitions of what is an “appropriate” initiation message and an “acceptable” number of initiation messages to send to potential partners before receiving a response. Previous research on rejection has identified that
increasing the number of contact messages is a predictor of mobile dating rejection (Daetz, 2016; Madhavan, 2017; Pugachevsky, 2018), but research has not identified how MDA users adapt their future interaction strategies in response to these rejections.

Multimediality may also help buffer the potential negative impacts of rejection. Many daters use different MDAs when they start to feel burnt out and overly rejected on one platform (Howard, 2017). Switching between MDAs gives them an opportunity to start fresh in a new pool of potential partners and experience the feelings of excitement in mobile dating that come from encountering profiles for the first time. However, these results may be temporary if these daters also begin to experience rejection within these new applications as well unless they change their conceptualization of MDA affordances.

Further, mobile daters can be directly rejected by others who perceive that their self-presentation online does not align with their offline self. While creating an idealized self-image can lead to more profile swipes, these relationships may quickly deteriorate after in-person meetings. Rejected mobile daters may be falling into a cyclical cycle of altering their idealized presentations further from their offline self to increase visibility on MDAs only to encounter more rejection when moving into the discovery phase and in-person meetings. Even when an MDA user is presenting their profile to the rest of the dating pool, they may have prioritized information they felt was pertinent to increase visibility on the platform, such as presenting an attractive selfie, instead of content that other daters are looking for, like biographical information and signals of authenticity. For example, men on dating applications that post shirtless pictures may not get as many matches as they anticipate (Levesley, 2019). Deviating from other daters’ self-presentation expectations can potentially heighten one’s display visibility in the MDA pool, but it may simultaneously lead to greater likelihood of rejection by others who are looking for a potential date adhering to perceived MDA norms. Those users attempting to leverage visibility and multimediality affordances to implement new self-presentation or communication strategies may have to refine them through trial and error, and likely experience rejection during that process.

Expectations for mobile dating success may be further exacerbated by the dissonance between imagined and actual visibility on MDAs. The seamless integration of algorithms within MDAs may cause users to feel that they have a high degree of control over their date selection. This sense of control can lead to higher expectations of date success (Tong et al., 2016). In turn, this perceived success can increase
expectations for successful relationship development. However, it is impossible for the swiper to know the amount of competition they are against when seeking an individual’s affections within the MDA. To the person they swiped on, the dater could just be one of a series of dozen potential relationship partners. While utilizing application features like “super-likes” to stand out can help differentiate a dater from other prospective partners, it is unclear if mobile daters view super likes as a positive signal that lead to relationship development.

These are only examples of how the affordances of MDAs could be utilized by daters and how variability in their utilization may influence how rejection is experienced and understood. This project aims to better understand how romantic rejection experiences of mobile daters are shaped by their perception and use of MDA affordances. To that end, the actual experiences of mobile daters who have encountered and rationalized their rejections are important. Through daters’ episodes of rejection, it will be possible to identify how these five affordances, as well as others, are perceived as factors within mobile dating.
CHAPTER 3: REJECTION, ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS, AND IMPLICIT THEORIES

Baumeister and Leary have previously identified a need to belong, or the “pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). This need is argued to be widely held and a powerful motivator for the formation of romantic relationships. Additionally, the motivation is also strong enough that individuals who do not fulfill it experience both short and long-term effects on their emotions, behavior, and health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Richman & Leary, 2009). One of the primary ways this need is unmet is when an individual’s relationship advances are rejected. As the goal of this study is to uncover the types of rejection daters experience in the MDA environment, I will first review the empirical literature on interpersonal rejection more broadly, before examining how individuals’ implicit theories and expected relational outcomes can influence their understandings and experiences of romantic rejection in MDAs.

Foundations of Rejection Research

Rejectors: Crafting and sending rejection messages. Rejection is a declaration by an individual or group that they do not (or no longer) want to interact or be in the company of the individual (Leary, 2005). Rejection is a specific action that occurs through interaction. When individuals design rejection messages, they are trying to perform a specific speech act that helps them achieve a communication goal (Searle, 1968). While the end goal of a rejection message might be social distancing, the various contexts in which rejection can occur, such as romantic relationships, work groups, and peer groups (Wesselmann, et al., 2016), can make it difficult for a speaker to effectively convey their message. The sense of meaning that is developed during an exchange is a product of getting the receiver to recognize the intentions of a message by strategically selecting the right words to produce a desired effect (Searle, 1965).

While rejection occurs during interpersonal interaction, an individual can make the decision to reject another person prior to the actual interaction. Leary (2001) argues individuals engage in relational evaluation, or identifying the degree to which a relationship will be valuable, important, or close, when determining if they will reject an individual. The value assigned to a relationship by a rejector can fluctuate over time in response to behaviors that occur over the course of prior interactions. The utilization of a perceived relational evaluation also implies there are different individual standards and psychological factors that could influence reactions to rejection events and decisions to reject (Leary, 2001). When a
person makes the decision to reject someone, they develop a message that will help them achieve their desired goals while also being empathetic to the impact their rejection message may have on the receiver.

Rejectors are often aware of how their messages can make rejected people feel (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993), and take that into account when they craft their rejection messages by trying to mitigate the damage rejection inflicts on the rejected person’s self-concept. When crafting their rejection messages, rejectors often aim to be as clear and direct as possible (Dillard, 1997). However, rejecting an individual and preventing hurt feelings are conflicting goals that can create ambiguity and often require a rejector to use multiple interaction attempts to achieve their goals (Baxter, 1984). In short, rejectors want to make their rejection messages clear and unambiguous, be consistent with their own goals for maintaining a positive self-presentation, and simultaneously aim to preserve the rejectee’s self-concept during this negative experience (Tong & Walther, 2011). Additionally, rejectors must determine how explicit they are going to be with their rejection messages (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The level of directness is evaluated based on the sender’s utilization of elements of direct (on-record) and passive (off-record) refusal.

A direct, on-record refusal is a clear, unambiguous message that is designed to achieve the rejector’s goals as effectively as possible. There are two types of on-record refusal. Bald, on record refusals put the goals of the rejector and ending a relationship over preserving the self-concept of the rejectee (i.e., target of rejection). Meanwhile, bald, on record rejections with redressive actions are still clear and direct, but also feature appeals to reinforce the rejectee’s self-concept during the rejection.

Passive, off record refusals are less clear. The rejector using a passive strategy may use more ambiguous messages such as sarcasm or jokes that minimize their role in damaging the self-concept of the rejectee (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Although these types of rejection can reduce the emotional impact of rejection for the rejectee, off record messages risk being too indirect and therefore are not always interpreted as rejection attempts by recipients. As such, a sender’s decision to communicate a passive or direct rejection is often guided by various, conflicting goals. Variations in rejectors’ delivery of such messages can also affect how rejectees receive and perceive the rejection.

**Rejectees: Experiences and effects of receiving rejection.** When an individual perceives and interprets social cues as rejection, they understand that the other individual, or group, does not want to have a relationship with them. One factor that could influence the perception of a rejection is the amount of
value a rejectee places on a potential relationship with the rejector. Sunnafrank (2015; 1986) argues that individuals aim to develop relationships, like moving from acquaintances to dating, only when they perceive a high degree of similarity between themselves and their potential partner. This similarity, as well as their physical attraction towards the other person, leads to placing a high value on the prospective relationship. When rejectees place a lot of value on relationships that do not work out they could experience greater emotional distress (Baumeister, et al., 1993). In the current context, the limited amount of profile information on MDAs could exacerbate these mismatched expectations of relationship success between rejectors and rejectees on MDAs.

Targets of rejection may feel decreased feelings of acceptance and increased levels of aggression (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Twenge, et al., 2001). Rejected individuals report feeling sad, angry, lonely, and jealous, but quite often the most common emotional response to rejection is a sensation of *hurt feelings* (Leary & Springer, 2001; Richman & Leary, 2009). In describing this sensation, many rejected people describe hurt feelings as semantically similar to emotional responses like neglect, rejection, being unwanted, betrayal, being misunderstood, and feeling isolated (Storm & Storm, 1987). Although people often feel hurt after experiencing rejection, or other violations of their need to belong, there is no uniform response to rejection. Interpreting and experiencing rejection are subjective experiences linked directly to the nature of the rejection crafted by message senders as described above, and the context in which those rejections are sent and received.

**Rejection in Romantic Relationships**

One of the contexts in which rejection occurs is romantic relationships (Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, & Alexander, 2005). While the need to belong is a strong motivator, people also seek romantic love because they desire the rewards and positive emotions that follow having a partner (Aron, Fisher, Mashek, Strong, Li, & Brown, 2005). Romantic relationships often develop from a point of initiation and can intensify into strong bonds (Knapp, 1978). However, not all attempts to initiate a romantic relationship are successful, and these attempts can end with rejection and hurt feelings (Richman & Leary, 2009; Vangelisti, et al., 2005). Few face-to-face relationship initiation attempts make it past introductions and initial conversations (Knapp, 1978), and most pre-marital romantic relationships eventually end (Lannutti & Cameron, 2002; Sprecher, Zimmerman, & Abrahams, 2010).
Rejection strategies in interpersonal communication are often called break-up strategies and defined as "any verbal or nonverbal approach to disengaging from a relationship" (Sprecher, et al., 2010 p. 67). Many stage models of relationship development and termination suggest that just as relationships move through phases of escalation they also can pass through de-escalation stages that signal the end of a relationship (Vangelisti, 2006). The last de-escalation stage is typically relationship termination, where the individuals determine the relationship is over and they should continue with their lives separately (Knapp, 1978).

Individuals apply various strategies to end a relationship depending on the level of intimacy they shared with their partner and their attribution of blame for the decay of that relationship (Baxter, 1984). Baxter (1984) identified eight trajectories for ending a relationship and argues relationship termination is a multifaceted process. These trajectories vary on their level of directness, number of attempts, attempts to repair the relationship, likelihood of relational continuation, and whether the termination was unilateral or bilateral (Baxter, 1984). In this research on dissolution trajectories, Baxter found the most common strategy to terminate a relationship was unilateral and indirect (i.e., passive). This ambiguous attempt to end a relationship required the rejector to make multiple attempts to end a relationship. While this approach may take more time than direct rejection, it may be chosen because rejectors believe direct approaches can be harmful to their rejectee's self-concept (Brown & Levinson, 1987), as noted above.

Simultaneously, the rejector also must contend with negative emotions and feelings of guilt. Even though individuals who initiate romantic rejection may have strong motivations for doing so, rejectors feel bad when they knowingly hurt the feelings and self-concept of those they refuse (Baumeister & Dhavale, 2001). Rejecting the romantic advances of others can also lead to feelings of guilt and distress even though the alternative of leading would-be-lovers along is often a waste of time and resources (Baumeister, et al., 1993; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995). To mitigate these feelings, people often make strategic decisions between many direct and indirect communication strategies when attempting to end their relationship (Honeycutt, Cantrill, & Allen, 1992).

Akin to passive rejection strategies, withdrawing is a involves a unilateral decision to try and end a relationship (Baxter, 1984; Honeycutt, et al., 1992). When a rejector withdraws, he or she stops sharing their feelings and decreases physical affection with the partner. As an off-record approach, acts of
withdrawal are often the hardest for the receiver to identify and accept as rejection (Baxter, 1984). Withdrawing and avoidance strategies are often used because they benefit the rejector and ensure they will no longer have to talk to their target. But these intentional and passive distancing strategies are perceived as less compassionate and empathetic by rejectees and often create more negative post-breakup emotional effects (Sprecher, et al., 2010).

*Direct rejection* is used less often than withdrawing, and these attempts at rejection can be either explicit statements that the relationship is over, or an opportunity to talk openly with the partner about the status of the relationship (Baxter, 1984). The explicit statements stating that the relationship has ended are implemented when the sender does not want to present an opportunity for compromise. Although this strategy does not always allow for the response of a rejectee, it is the easiest one to interpret as a clear rejection message (Baxter, 1984). Moreover, while the rejection may be clearer and more hurtful in the moment, direct rejections are associated with fewer negative outcomes (Sprecher, et al., 2010).

Baxter’s (1984) rejections trajectories were reexamined by Collins and Gillath (2012) to account for advancements in communication technology that had been made since the original study. Specifically, their research sought to identify how new mobile communication features, like SMS messaging, caller ID, and social networking sites, factored into break-up strategies. In doing so, these authors identified tactics involving technology, like using text-messaging and changing a Facebook relationship status and classified them as *distant/mediated communication* (Collins & Gillath, 2012). They argue individuals using mediated communication to break-up do so because they have high levels of anxiety and wish to avoid direct confrontation whereas people employing withdrawal strategies are only trying to avoid their former partner. This distinction in motivations may be reflected in the perceived affordances identified by MDA rejectors implementing strategies for rejections in earlier stages of relational development, like ghosting.

This dichotomy between self and other orientations is further examined by LeFebvre et al. (2019) who also extends Baxter’s empirical work but examines rejection along additional basic dimensions. In their work, rejection can be direct or indirect, as well as self-oriented or other-oriented. Self-oriented rejection features little effort to protect the rejectee from the emotional damages of rejection and instead focuses on using rejection to fulfil the rejector’s own needs. Alternatively, other-oriented rejection aims to protect the self-esteem of the rejectee and end a relationship without inflicting undue harm (Baxter, 1984).
While Baxter’s dimensions of relationship dissolution have been previously applied to established relationships, more recent studies have examined the interaction between directness, compassion, and rejection in early relationship rejection messages. Senders have an understanding about which rejection messages are more compassionate than others (Sprecher, et al., 2010). The rejection strategies including open communication, like the direct approach to discuss relationship quality, are seen as the most compassionate because they are easy to interpret and focused on protecting the emotions of others (Sprecher, et al., 2010); however, strategies like ghosting are conceptualized as less compassionate because they are indirect and self-serving (LeFebvre, et al., 2019).

While the motivations and strategic decision making of rejectors has been previously studied, less research has identified how these strategies are viewed by receivers. This project seeks to expand on this area by identifying how the perceptions and understanding of rejection approaches are conceptualized by MDA users. This next section will identify how romantic rejection has been previously studied within mobile communication and explain the connection between mobile dating rejection and the implicit theories of individual daters.

**Romantic Rejection in Mobile Communication**

The process of framing and delivering rejection messages can be influenced by the kind of technological system used to send the message (Tong & Walther, 2011). Studies have identified how mobile communication channels are utilized in relationship disengagement and found the purpose of breaking up via mobile technology, as opposed to face-to-face interactions, is to separate the rejector from the rejectee physically and psychologically (Collins & Gillith, 2012; Sprecher, et al., 2010). Mobile communication channels like text messaging were also used to terminate relationships (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013). While text messaging is the most frequently used direct strategy (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013), rejectors have also been found to rely on other mobile communication and computer-mediated channels like voice mail, email, instant messaging, and social networking sites to send their rejection messages (Sprecher et al., 2010). While these options have elements of directness, individuals could manipulate the technology to achieve varying degrees of passiveness, such as a rejector calling to leave a break-up voice mail when they know their receiver cannot answer their phone.
Along with smartphones came MDAs with affordances that could be leveraged for novel rejection strategies like *ghosting*: a unilateral decision to end communication, withdraw from an individual, and prompt relationship dissolution using at least one technological medium (LeFebvre, 2017b). As an indirect disengagement strategy, ghosting requires the sender to simultaneously withdrawal from the conversation and avoid future interactions with the rejectee (LeFebvre, et al., 2019). While ghosting may be a frequently used rejection strategy in MDAs, as an indirect strategy, while the sender is aware that they have enacted a purposeful rejection strategy, the act itself is largely up to interpretation by the receiver. When inexperienced mobile daters experience ghosting for the first time, they may be unsure if they have been rejected or if their potential partner is just not responding to their messages.

MDA actions like ghosting may parallel nonverbal face-to-face rejection strategies like ignoring or avoiding a potential partner and withdrawing from interaction, but unlike face-to-face rejection, MDA rejections are experienced differently within the mobile environment, as they are often more ambiguous for receivers and occur much more frequently. As was previously discussed in Chapter 2, the combined affordances of MDAs such as availability and visibility can impact an individual dater’s perceptions of rejection. Highly accessible and available MDA users are frequently checking their accounts and profiles for new matches and notifications. As they spend more time on the MDA, these heavier users may feel that others they have swiped right on or initiated communications with (i.e., text messaged) are not responding back to them quickly enough; this perceived response latency can lead to sensations of rejection stemming from a perceived lack of interest from other daters (Howard, 2017).

Moreover, inaccurate expectations of visibility and competition within MDAs may also lead to feelings of rejection (Halaburda, Piskorski, & Yildirim, 2017). While users are developing eye-catching profile content to be noticed by others, they may be creating idealized profiles of themselves they cannot embody in their text messages or face-to-face interactions with others in the discovery phase. When combined with the afforded portability and locatability of these applications, MDA users have more opportunities to be rejected, and a larger pool to be rejected from—all at their fingertips when they connect to the MDA.

While daters’ MDA use can be more or less frequent, over time, many daters feel that their apps provide them more opportunities to feel rejected faster as they continue to use MDAs (Marateck, 2018).
Checking in on matches and notifications are frequent actions to pass the time, and users feel less excited at the prospect of finding a potential partner the longer they used these applications (Emery, 2017). Although some popular press articles note that MDA rejection is just a part of the process of mobile dating, being on the receiving end of serial rejections over time can lead to feelings of burn-out over time as daters attempt to understand why they have been unsuccessful in meeting their relationship goals (Howard, 2017). Experiencing rejection in the MDA environment (especially passive, ambiguous rejection like ghosting) is often related to developing dating application fatigue; after nine months of mobile dating application use 65% of users felt like finding a date was more like a job than a fun experience (Emery, 2017).

Because of the heightened potential for ambiguity, every dater’s conceptualization of MDA rejection is affected by their individual perceptions of rejection and the theories they use to explain and interpret their experiences. These internal cognitions are the foundation for forming expectations for relationship successes and failures, and enacting communication strategies during the rise and fall of relationships (Honeycutt, et al., 1992). Some of these differences may also be reflected in strategies implemented to overcome the negative feelings associated with dating rejection. In this study, it will be important to identify how rejection is interpreted by MDA users who differ in their expectations of relationship success and personal theories of relationship development. This next section will explain how implicit theories are used by individuals to understand, interpret, and respond to MDA rejection.

Implicit Theories and the Experience of Romantic Rejection

Implicit theories are naïve assumptions about human attributes that structure the way individuals broadly interpret the actions and outcomes of others and motivate themselves (Dweck, et al., 1995). Combined with overarching goals, these implicit theories guide the way an individual reaches his or her goals and how they create a meaning system for their own attributions (Dweck, et al., 1995). Importantly, people also use their implicit theories to understand the behaviors of others that they encounter. These theories guide their general beliefs and assumptions about the behaviors they perceive, the judgments they make, and the attributions they assign to explain the actions of others. For instance, an individual’s implicit theory on a partner’s personality characteristic, like intelligence, athleticism, or morality, will influence the social judgments they make when determining if behaviors were related to state or trait attributions. Research on implicit theories has been used to illustrate differences in perception that lead to variations in
attribution assignment between individuals (Silvera, Moe, & Iverson, 2000), how an individual’s mindset, or worldview, is related to their goal setting and self-regulation (Burnette, O'Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013), and how people respond to negative events (Dweck, et al., 1995). Aside from explaining discrete behaviors, people’s implicit theories can also play an important role in the formation of perceptions, intentions, and behaviors within relationships (Canevello & Crocker, 2011; Freedman, et al., 2018; Knee, et al., 2003).

Individuals have different beliefs about what makes a good relationship, and the early stages of a relationship are often seen as a test for their potential success (Knee, 1998). People’s implicit theories include their perceptions about general features of relationships, as well as folk theories of romance like “love conquers all,” “there is someone for everyone,” “love can happen at first sight,” and we should “follow our heart” (Knee, 1998). Importantly, these implicit theories of relationships tend to be quite stable over time and are used as a lens to evaluate potential relationships (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002).

There are two broad perspectives within romantic relationship implicit theories: destiny and growth mindsets. An individual may believe that a relationship is destined to occur or succeed. Individuals with a destiny mindset who do not immediately hit it off with their potential partner may give up on that relationship’s development more quickly than others who do not hold such mindsets (Knee, 1998). Initial impressions are extremely important to those with destiny mindsets, and less-than-perfect candidates are frequently discarded. People with a destiny mindset will also evaluate their relationship positively if they perceive their partner to be a perfect fit, but their perceived relationship quality decreases if the partner is no longer considered an ideal match (Franiuk, et al., 2002). These individuals also interpret the actions of their perceived soulmate through the filter of their destiny mindset and are more likely to positively skew their compatibility and downplay conflicts (Franiuk, et al., 2002). Therefore, an individual in a destiny mindset is more likely to attribute the failings of their partner to extrinsic factors beyond that person’s control if they still consider the person their ideal partner.

Another relationship perspective comes from individuals who hold a growth theory of relationship development. Those who hold growth mindset generally believe that initial impressions are not always as important as development and closeness between partners (Knee, 1998). Unlike those with destiny beliefs, people with growth mindsets believe that relationship strength and quality can occur when partners conquer
obstacles and grow closer. When making attributions about a partner, they will attribute negative behaviors to intrinsic failings, but they may be willing to work through these issues because the potential relationship is more important. People in growth mindsets are less threatened by the knowledge that their partner is not ideal because they think people can change over time in a relationship; as a result, their threshold of an “acceptable” potential partner is often lower than those with destiny beliefs (Franiuk, et al., 2002).

Implicit theories of romantic relationships have been shown to influence how people experience and interpret romantic rejection and make attributions about the cause(s) of relationship failure. People with destiny beliefs are more likely and are quicker to end a relationship whereas individuals with a growth mindset may extend the breakup process because they have faith the relationship can work out (Knee, 1998). The differential effects of implicit theories on relationships are further exemplified by the behaviors that people use to make sense of relational conflict.

When people with growth mindsets encounter disagreements, they see them as opportunities to better understand their partner and develop the relationship. Growth mindset partners are also more likely to seek help from their social networks to buffer the impacts of relational challenges (Knee, Patrick, Vietor, & Neighbors, 2004). Conversely, people with destiny mindsets who perceive their relationship as “meant to be” may temporarily ignore the implications of relational conflict; but these views are often hard to sustain in the face of consistent threats to the relationship, like alternative ideal partners and new sources of relational conflict (Knee, et al., 2004). As those individuals with destiny mindsets continue to encounter instances where the partner does not meet their desired ideals, they will diagnose issues in their relationship and desire change in their partner. When people with destiny mindsets start making negative intrinsic attributions of their partner’s behavior, they will feel increasingly dissatisfied with their relationship and move towards ending it (Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001).

However, it is important to note that these broad implicit beliefs do not operate on a dialectic. Growth and destiny beliefs can be held independently to various degrees (Knee, et al., 2003). For example, people with high growth beliefs and low destiny beliefs could contend that relationships evolve through confrontation, development, and attempts to maintain and improve the relationship over time. These people would be less likely to immediately try and diagnose a relational problem (Knee, et al., 2003). Conversely, someone with high destiny beliefs and low growth beliefs may think that problems can be diagnosed but
they cannot be significantly improved (Knee, et al., 2003). These implicit theories of relationships are then related to the individual’s motivation to try and change their partner, or cut their losses and move on. While implicit theories are connected to how an individual seeks out and maintains his or her relationships, they are also connected to how people respond to rejection within MDAs

**Implicit theories, predicted outcome values, and rejection in mobile dating.** The implicit theories of relationships framework has been applied to identify how general beliefs about relationships can lead daters to employ and interpret ghosting within MDAs. Freedman et al. (2018) conducted a study to identify how differences in growth and destiny mindsets were related to different perceptions of ghosting, intentions to ghost, and ghosting behaviors. They surveyed daters to identify if there was a widespread understanding of the concept of ghosting and to evaluate the implicit theories of romantic relationships (growth vs. destiny) that influenced their likelihood of using ghosting as a rejection strategy in MDAs. Within their sample, 23% of daters reported that they had been ghosted by a prior partner, and 18% indicated that they had used the strategy themselves (Freedman, et al., 2018). The people who had experienced and utilized ghosting were then asked additional questions to identify how their feelings about ghosting were correlated to their implicit theories of relationships.

Overall, individuals with strong destiny beliefs perceived ghosting as an acceptable rejection strategy for short- and long-term relationships whereas those with growth beliefs were less willing to endorse this rejection strategy (Freedman, et al., 2018). If growth theorists did utilize ghosting, it was only after they had gathered enough information about the potential partner to make a decision regarding the status of the relationship’s potential development. For example, growth theorists are generally unlikely to employ ghosting until they meet with a prospective partner in-person and communicate over time to develop a formal assessment of the emerging romantic relationship (Freedman, et al., 2018). This delayed use of ghosting may occur because mobile daters with a growth mindset are willing to meet with their potential partner and give them a chance to initiate more intimate conversations and define their emerging relationship. They may also be frustrated after encountering ghosting because they expect their potential partners to communicate their perceived incompatibility openly.

Alternatively, people with strong destiny beliefs who reported they had been the targets of ghosting in their previous relationships were still likely to consider it to be an acceptable rejection strategy
(Freedman, et al., 2018). This contradicts previous findings illustrating how individuals with strong destiny beliefs often react with hostility and aggression to rejection strategies that include relational ostracism (Chen, et al., 2012; Freedman, et al., 2018). Freedman et al. (2018) suggest that this contradiction may be because destiny mindset daters see ghosting as a means to an end and thinking about it negatively would elicit feelings of cognitive dissonance, leading destiny theorists to view themselves in a negative light or feel bad for using ghosting themselves. Additionally, ghosting may not affect destiny theorists as much as other forms of rejection because they may evaluate the impact of ghosting as temporary (Freedman, et al., 2018). MDAs provide daters with a chance to quickly move on to other partners, and this could lead those with strong destiny beliefs to find new matches, thus quickly resolving the impact of ghosting on their self-image.

While Freedman et al. have previously identified how ghosting has been viewed as an (un)acceptable strategy by daters with growth and destiny mindsets, more research is needed to see how these implicit theories and general expectations for a relationship interact with how individuals respond to other kinds of rejection in MDAs. Although their study identifies how implicit theories influence the ways in which ghosting in MDAs has been viewed, Freedman et al. do not identify how implicit theories are related to the other rejection strategies that can be used within MDAs. For instance, while those with strong destiny beliefs may consider ghosting to be acceptable, how might they to direct, on-record rejections? Although daters with growth mindsets judge ghosting negatively, does this mean they find more direct romantic refusals to be more appropriate in MDAs? To what extent do daters’ mindsets influence their use of various affordances in MDAs when processing their rejection? This study integrates Freedman et al.’s findings to examine how daters’ implicit theories of romance may influence their experience of different forms of rejections that occur in MDAs.

Additionally, Freedman et al. do not examine if a dater’s reaction to a rejection strategy (like ghosting) varies depending on how they utilize the affordances within MDAs. Those with stronger destiny beliefs not only reject others more quickly, they may also develop heightened expectations of relationship development with specific potential partners within the app, if (after viewing the observed characteristics on the target’s profile and exchanging messages) they feel they have found “the one” based on their afforded
visibility and observed warrants within a profile. Having such high expectations and future anticipation for relational success dashed may impact daters with growth and destiny beliefs differently.

Moreover, implicit theories can influence daters’ predicted outcome valuations (for both a partner or a budding relationship; Sunnafrank, 1986). These decisions of whether a new interaction should be pursued towards a relationship are used by individuals as they evaluate if the potential rewards of an interaction warrant the emotional costs, or time, associated with building a relationship (Sonnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Sunnafrank contends that attraction is associated with assigning a high predicted outcome valuation to a prospective partner (Sonnafrank, 2015); however, surprising events, like rejection, happen throughout an interaction, and these events impact previously assigned ratings (Sonnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). While POV has previously been used to explore the motivation for pursuing a relationship, it has not evaluated if the emotional response to events that violate predictions, like rejection, are impacted by the relational value assigned by the rejectee. This suggests that rejections may lead to a greater negative impact if the receiver found the potential partner desirable and felt as though the relationship was bound for further development. This study will identify how daters experience rejection depending on their general implicit theories of romantic relationships, predicted outcome valuations, and understanding of affordances within MDAs.

In summary, as daters’ process multiple MDA experiences simultaneously, their existing implicit theories might shape how the multitude of rejection events are internalized, how specific predictions and valuations of potential partners and unrealized relationships are formed, and how they are integrated into future MDA use. While individuals may vary on their levels of growth and destiny beliefs, there may also be important differences in how daters think about and integrate their understanding of technology into their processing of rejection. This increasing MDA use can then lead to a more nuanced understanding of normative rejection practices (i.e., when are certain strategies are “appropriate” versus “inappropriate”), and subsequent interpretations and emotional response. Rejections, or these instances where there is a lack of initiation, lack of escalation, or a declaration by an individual that they no longer want to interact, may occur before individuals develop deep relationship bonds. However, the overall implicit mindset regarding romance, the perceived importance of the budding relationship, and the number of prior rejections
an individual has received from others within an MDA are major factors in how daters try to make sense of their relationship development on these apps.

This chapter and the previous one outline my initial proposition that technological affordances and implicit theories of romance play a part in how MDA users perceive and experience rejection; this research project provides an opportunity to explore how these various interpretive frameworks from communication and social psychology work together to better understand the how rejection speech acts are understood on by daters in the MDA environment. In the next section, I will describe how these frameworks were used to ground the development of qualitative interviews designed to investigate two specific research questions. Then, I will explain the methodology that was used to conduct and analyze the interviews within this project.
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

This project aimed to further understand how MDA users experience rejections during relationship development. These personal perceptions can be influenced by an individual's implicit theories on how relationships develop and his or her conceptualization of the affordances within MDA systems. For this study, I adopted a qualitative method to explore how mobile daters experience rejection and to uncover how these experiences relate to their anticipated use of MDAs in the future. Qualitative methods can be used to provide rich, detailed descriptions of lived experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I used a phenomenological approach to conduct in-depth interviews with mobile daters. These interviews combined a semi-structured question route, episodic prompts, and free listing to understand how these daters process, understand, and move on from rejections. I interviewed 41 participants between May and September of 2020 within the United States, specifically communities surrounding universities within Michigan, and triangulated their responses through an interpretive phenomenological analysis. In this chapter, I will summarize the sensitizing theoretical constructs and review the research questions that guided this methodological approach. Then, I will explain the data collection procedures used within this project before providing details surrounding my interview framework, sampling, and analysis.

Background Summary and Research Questions

Individuals use multiple strategies to reject others and dissolve relationships (Baxter, 1984). Within mobile dating, strategies like ghosting have been previously studied as indirect strategies of rejection (Freedman, et al., 2018; LeFebvre, 2017b). However, some approaches to rejection are more direct than ghosting, and these various approaches to rejection could be perceived and interpreted differently by daters. Previous research has applied a relatively narrow scope to romantic rejection and has not considered the multitude of strategies that may exist within MDAs. Therefore, the first research question will be used to guide interview questions and understand how daters define mobile dating rejection.

RQ1: What types of romantic rejection do people encounter in their attempts to initiate romantic relationships through mobile dating applications?

In the attempt at initiation, when a rejection has occurred, multiple factors can influence how it is perceived and interpreted—for example, destiny and growth implicit theories of relationships can affect an individual’s judgments about the cause of a relationship’s failed development, attributions of rewarding traits
in prospective partners, and perceptions of relational compatibility. This decision making that occurs within MDAs could also be impacted by the affordances used by mobile daters within their matchmaking. Combined, mobile affordances, implicit theories, and expected outcomes can help provide clarity to the perceptual processes used by daters to interpret and make sense of rejection. Moreover, these perspectives can help explain why some forms of rejection within MDA relationship development are experienced differently by daters.

**RQ2: How do heterosexual mobile daters interpret and experience mobile dating rejection?**

Qualitative research can be a useful tool when refining existing constructs, testing theories in new contexts, and proposing new theoretical ideas (Munck, 2004). Examining responses to rejection through implicit theories and affordances is necessary to draw critical implications about how these experiences within MDAs are tied to a user’s relationship strategies and understanding of technology. To better explore these experiences of rejection, a phenomenological approach was used to understand the meaning participants ascribed to these speech acts. This approach used three distinct data collection procedures to elicit participants’ descriptions of their lived experiences of rejection: semi-structured interviews, episodic prompts, and free listing. Data collection began with semi-structured interviews, in which participants described past experiences of rejection in MDAs that occurred within the initiation stage. To triangulate these types and experiences of rejection, participants walked me through episodic stories of rejection. They then completed free listing prompts regarding the known types of rejection were integrated within the semi-structured interviews. I elaborate on these procedures below.

**Data Collection Procedures**

All data collection procedures described below were executed remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom, and digital tools were implemented to facilitate data collection for the free listing and pile sort activities. Moving the interviews to an online platform did not affect the question route, but it did influence the way participants illustrated their use of MDAs during a rejection.

In this project’s semi-structured interview sessions, root questions, and their order in the interview, were similar across participants. However, unlike structured interviews, the probing questions used to follow up on the thoughts and rejection episodes shared by the participants can change across interviews in
response to emerging phenomena (Tracey, 2013). This flexibility within the semi-structured interview process allowed for a more conversational interaction between the researcher and participants and allow for more rapport to develop between the interviewer and participant (Bernard, 2017). This rapport helped make the participant feel more comfortable to share information with the researcher, especially when sharing their rejection stories, which often dealt with perceived personal failings.

Interviews were designed to last for about 90 minutes, with the shortest being 44 and the longest being 125 minutes. Participants interested in the study were first screened through a brief phone interview that included demographic questions and opportunities for the potential participants to explain their prior experiences with MDAs. This included general questions about which MDAs they have used (currently or in the past), the length of time they have used these MDAs, and their relationship seeking activities and goals. Following this initial screening, eligible participants were given the opportunity to schedule an interview via Zoom. Several adjustments were made to accommodate the remote nature of data collection. For example, because all interviews took place remotely, instead of free listing terms on index cards, or similar physical pieces of paper that could be moved and organized during pile sorts, the interviewees used the chat features within Zoom and a shared Google Doc to replicate the listing and sorting experience. Instead of being able to observe participants utilize their MDAs, walkthrough descriptions of rejection in the episodic prompts were limited to what participants could describe and demonstrate within the video interview. These adjustments were planned prior to the actual data collection sessions and did not interfere with the quality of the data collected during this study.

The interview session began with some introductory questions before transitioning into the free listing and pile sort activities where participants were asked to list as many types of mobile dating rejection as they could. Following the free listing, additional root and probing questions were used to identify how the daters ranked these types of rejection in terms of hurt feelings and compassion for the receiver. Participants were then asked to share episodes of the rejections they had experienced within the mobile dating process. Additional probing questions were used following these episode descriptions to expound upon themes within these experiences. Because of the sensitive nature of these interviews, I offered a list of additional counseling resources that could be made available for participants in the event they shared anything during the interview process that led to them needing additional help to process these emotions.
Interviews were conducted online at a time of the participant’s choice, based on his or her availability and preference. All interviews were audio and video recorded and supplemented with handwritten notes. The recorded interviews were transcribed and then subjected to analysis techniques after a thorough reading of the notes and transcriptions. This allowed me to develop an understanding of the experiences shared by the participants and led to the development of general themes that could be used to compare the experiences of these mobile daters. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants—at the end of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym; if they did not, a pseudonym was assigned to them. Care was taken to ensure the selected pseudonyms reflected the racial and ethnic identity of the participants within this study while still maintaining their anonymity.

**Semi-structured interview.** Methodologically, interviews are conversations with purpose (Lindlof, 1995; Tracey, 2013). As a qualitative method, interviews provide researchers with an opportunity to better understand how their participants make sense of the world (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Through these in-depth interviews, conversations led to a joint construction of reality where participants walked through thoughts, memories, and stories about mobile dating rejection by the people who experienced them. To facilitate the conversational nature of interviewing, I used a semi-structured interview guide which consists of some specific root questions, but allows great flexibility for participants to offer their own perspectives, or elaborate in their responses through less structured probes.

Interview questions were focused to examine the negative or unexpected instances of rejection that were experienced by participants within MDAs. Mobile daters were asked to explain their approach to finding a potential partner within an MDA, including warranting factors and general features or criteria they used to decide between potential partners, interactions they had within their MDAs, and the specific instances of rejection they had experienced. Then, they were then asked to reflect on these rejection experiences and discuss their emotional impacts. Root questions and probes were used for clarification, exploring emerging themes related to affordances and implicit theories of romantic relationships, and understanding what led rejected daters to predicting a favorable outcome in these initial MDA interactions.

To identify how a participant’s perceived affordances changed or shaped their interpretations of MDA rejection, I also asked daters how they conceptualized affordances within their MDA use. Additional
root questions and probes within the semi-structured interviews were developed to explore how the participants’ perceptions of availability, locatability, multimediaility, portability, and visibility were related to the meaning they ascribed to rejections they experienced. These questions explored how mobile daters used the affordances both during and after they experienced rejection within the application.

**Free listing & pile sorting.** This project used free listing and pile sorting prompts to develop a stronger understanding of what MDA users consider to be romantic relationship rejection within the mobile dating process. After a series of introductory questions regarding MDA use, participants were asked to “share any type of rejection they had experienced, used, or even heard about” to help me develop a taxonomy of the types of rejection experienced by MDA users. As a data collection technique, free listing has been used within previous studies as to develop a clearer interpretation of a *cultural domain*, which is “an organized set of words, concepts, or sentences, all on the same level of contrast, that jointly refer to a single conceptual sphere” (Weller & Romney, 1988, p. 9). In this project, the cultural domain of interest is the various behaviors MDA users conceptualize and define as romantic rejection. While some researchers have examined MDA user’s reactions to specific rejection approaches, they have not identified the various types of rejection that could exist in this mobile dating environment.

In free listing, it is important to identify the frequency with which a term is mentioned by participants across the data set to help define the *coherence* of the domain, or the general agreement among the participants about the inclusion of rejection types within a broader interpretation of rejection. Coherence is often used as a heuristic to identify the contents and boundaries of a phenomenon (Borgatti, 1998), and the ranking of a term in a free list, or pile sort, can also serve as a heuristic that gives the researcher perspective on the hierarchical relationship between the terms being investigated (Yeh, et al., 2014). Importantly, these lists can be used to help illustrate the consensus among members of a cultural group and their shared understanding of the important concepts of a domain (Yeh, et al., 2014).

Coherence is achieved by maintaining a frequency distribution of the terms shared during the free listing component of the interview. As frequencies can change when new information is recorded from the interview transcripts, it can be difficult to identify where boundaries should be drawn. Therefore, the frequency with which a term is mentioned and its placement within a participant’s free list were both used as markers of that concept’s overall importance within the sample (Bousfield & Barclay, 1950). This
interaction between frequency and order is referred to as salience, and this construct serves as an additional metric to help identify which terms are important within a sample.

Salience ranks serve as a reflection of the types of rejection typically experienced and conceptualized by MDA users. Previous research has illustrated that this kind of data can help investigators identify which categories should receive more focus within the study and justify why some constructs are more culturally significant than others (Gravlee, 1998). In other words, this analysis helps identify to what extent there is a sense of shared definition about rejection approaches between MDA users.

After participants shared their rejection lists, pile sorting was used within the free listing exercise to contextualize relationships between these complex constructs of rejection (Trotter & Potter, 1993). In pile sorting, terms that are shared by the participants during free listing are grouped together in separate piles that eventually are combined by the participant into one continuum relating to their experiences. Participants were asked to group their rejections based on their perceived similarities and rank MDA rejections on their level of emotional impact and clarity (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Tong & Walther, 2011; Vangelisti, et al., 2005). Similar to free lists, the order that these terms are shared in related to their salience within that category. For example, when asked to rank their most hurtful rejection, the first strategy cited by participants may differ from their first response on the initial free list prompt. These differences help the researcher understand how mobile daters contextually interpret these forms of rejection.

**Episodic prompts.** Finally, to further contextualize how daters interpreted romantic rejection, prompts eliciting participants to describe their rejections in greater detail were included within the question route. These episodic prompts were influenced by the walkthrough method. The walkthrough method is an approach to evaluating how mobile applications guide users and shape their communicative experiences (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2016). During the episodes of rejection, participants were encouraged to describe the steps of their MDA use to reveal intricate details about elements of rejection and perceived affordances that they might not have passively considered as part of their MDA use in their initial interview responses.

Walkthroughs can also be helpful in bringing to light the cultural influences within a communication technology. The interface of an application and the development of its systems are often driven by economic and political interests (van Dijck, 2013), as well as expressions of user identity (Nakamura, 2002).
Moreover, the everyday use of these applications is connected to the affordances a user perceives within the app (Light, et al., 2016), and often unexpected user practices can emerge to drive future research on participant-driven activities that were previously undocumented within the application.

Within this project, participants were asked to share three episodes of rejection. The first could be any type of rejection they wanted to share, but the second and third prompts were used to ask participants to reflect on the “most considerate” and “most hurtful” rejection experiences they had encountered. These episodes were included based on the importance of emotional effects seen in previous research, that influence the interpretation and processing of rejection (Baumeister, et al., 1993; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Tong & Walther, 2011). These walkthroughs were also compared to the rankings participants ascribed to types of rejection within the free listing and pile sorting prompts.

Sample

For this project, I interviewed 41 (14 male) individuals from the American Midwest using a university SONA sampling pool and a convenience sample recruited using advertisements on social media and university websites. Snowball sampling was also used whenever participants shared contact information for other individuals who might meet the study criteria. Data collection occurred from May to September of 2020. Participants were offered a $40 Amazon gift card after participating in the interview portion of the study. To be included in the sample, participants had to be MDA users, between 18 and 25 years of age, and using MDAs to seek heterosexual relationships. The demographic information for the participants can be found in Table 4.1. A majority of the daters within the study were white (55.6 % women, 64.3 % men), with South Asian Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans making up smaller proportions of the sample. While these percentages over-represent white mobile daters (Morning Consult, 2020), the make-up of the sample is similar to the demographic characteristics of the Midwestern college communities the population was drawn from.

This group was important for this study because these young adults are the most frequent users of MDAs and are likely to have a device capable of supporting MDAs (Anderson, et al., 2020; Pew, 2018; Smith, 2016). Moreover, these individuals are at a critical developmental point for the formation of norms and expectations about romantic relationships (Arnett, 2000). In line with previous research on the utilization of MDAs, Tinder was the most used app within the sample, second to Bumble. Hinge, a dating app reported
by the participants to have more of a long-term relationship focus, was also frequently adopted. Most often, dating apps in the “other” category consisted of racial or ethnically bounded dating apps, such as Dil Mil – which caters to people of South Asian descent – or applications with limited user bases like The League – an MDA that caters to older singles with established careers (Wells, 2016).

While the user base within an MDA typically has parity between the number of available men and women (Anderson, et al. 2020), the sample in this study skewed female. Throughout the data collection process, women were more likely to respond to the recruitment call, regardless of the channel. This is in line with previous research regarding online calls for participation that argue women and men are likely to make different decisions regarding participation in a study because of characteristics like empathy and emotional closeness (Smith, 2008). This trend may also be related to the type of data collection occurring within a study, as men are to equally likely to complete survey questions but less likely to complete qualitative data, like diary entries (te Braak & Minnen, 2020). As data collection continued, more men were referred to the study from previous participants. This snowball sampling technique led to an increased representation of men within the final sample.

Although homosexual daters make up a sizable proportion of MDA users (Castro & Barrada, 2020), they were not recruited as part of this study’s sample. Past work illustrates these daters often have different experiences than heterosexual daters within MDAs; ensuring both of these perspectives were sufficiently represented was beyond the scope of a single project. Homosexual and bisexual mobile daters’ experiences of rejection may be unique from heterosexual mobile daters, as well. Therefore, this group deserves its own detailed investigation surrounding their understanding of MDA rejection and so were not included in the current sample.

**Data Analysis**

The aim of phenomenological qualitative research is to focus on the creation of meaning that occurs when an interviewer guides a participant to reflect on their previous experiences. Central to these analyses are “thick descriptions” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These descriptions, conveyed through the participants language and unique perspective, reflect the person’s social, cultural, and interpersonal experiences (Davidsen, 2013). To understand the relationship between these subjective experiences and theoretical
constructs, phenomenological researchers interpret meaning from human actions and connect these interpretations back to theoretical constructs through a process referred to as a double hermeneutic.

In this process, I applied a framework of analysis known as used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to guide my interpretation of the experiences of rejection through the words of mobile daters. Then, I connected these concepts and themes drawn from the interviews back to the literature I used to develop the foundation for the questions within this study, completing the double hermeneutic. In the following sections, I will describe the analytical approach for each data collection procedure within the semi-structured interview.

**Table 4.1: Participant Demographics by Gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
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<td>7.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>South Asian</td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Dating App Accounts</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bumble</td>
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<td>48.1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>78.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinge</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>57.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tinder</td>
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<td>77.8</td>
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<td>92.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Apps</td>
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<td>22.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21.4</td>
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<tr>
<th>Length of app use (Avg. years)</th>
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<th>Men</th>
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<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Familiarity with apps</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pretty Familiar</td>
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<td>7.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very Familiar</td>
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<td>92.6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>85.7</td>
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<td>Frequent Use</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total (N = 41)</th>
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<th>Men</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>14</td>
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</table>

**Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)**. IPA is a phenomenological method that guides researchers to understand how the lived experiences of participants are reflected in their perceptions.
In this method, researchers must be aware of how their presuppositions could impact their interpretations throughout the analysis. IPA is a balancing act where the researcher must be reflexive of their own precognitions while also diving deeper into themes perceived to be at the core of the phenomenon of interest. Similar to other qualitative methods, IPA has no strict procedure for researchers to follow, and instead is designed to be adaptable to the researcher’s specific approach and topic (Davidsen, 2013).

In this study, I started by conducting a repeated reading of the text in the interview transcripts. During the first reading, memos were written in the margin to note significant quotations, in line with previous studies employing IPA (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). These first comments were used to summarize pertinent information, make associations between transcripts, and form preliminary interpretations. During this phase, I evaluated the text multiple times to become as familiar with the account shared by the interviewees as possible.

After the initial passes through the text, the second margin was used to record emerging themes using keywords, a step highlighted in Davidsen (2013). At this point, themes were still abstract and conceptual in order to capture the essence of what is being described without asserting categories based on theoretical presumptions. During these first two stages of analysis, all of the data were treated as potential themes, and no attempt was made to omit or select certain themes for analysis. This is similar to the phenomenological approach’s goal of placing equal value in the experiences shared by participants (Smith, et al., 1999).

The next step was to take the list of potential themes and attempt to identify connections between them. Through this process, I identified how these ideas were clustered together, which allowed me to draw interpretations about how certain themes related to the participant’s lived experiences and to find the specific phrases the participants used to describe those themes.

The final stage of IPA involved producing a table of themes. A condensed version of this table with sample themes can be found in the appendix. These themes represented the ideas that were captured most strongly within the participant’s responses (Smith, et al., 1999). In order to verify that a theme was represented in the verbatim transcript and not just based on the researcher’s bias, the table in the appendix also connects the subthemes to significant quotations that were used to justify these interpretations, in line
with previous IPA research (Smith, et al., 1999). Within this phase of analysis, I also reduced the total number of themes based on the amount of support they had received throughout the analysis. In this study, the threshold for determining if a theme has enough evidence and support was saturation.

Saturation has previously been conceptualized as the point where the researcher can predict what interviewees will say in response to interview questions (Tracey, 2013). Another heuristic that can help a researcher identify when they have met the burden of saturation is qualitative clarity (Luborsky & Rubenstein, 1995). Qualitative clarity has been achieved when researchers draw from a sampling pool that is deep enough to provide sufficient insights into the topic and have collected enough data to be sensitive to the broader cultural factors that can lead to varying responses within the sample (Luborsky & Rubenstein, 1995). Researchers need to ensure they are developing analytical categories that are supported throughout the data and avoid reaching conclusions prematurely because of their own biases. Therefore, when interesting phenomena emerged during the analysis, I followed up on those themes throughout the interviews to ensure support across the data set before generalizing them as similar to the experiences of the sampled population.

While IPA is helpful for examining the experiences shared through the use of semi-structured interviews, two additional analytical tools were used to triangulate the themes shared in the interviews: free listing and pile sorting and episodic stories of rejection.

**Free listing and pile sorting analysis.** On average, participants listed five different forms of rejection, but these lists ranged from three items to ten unique forms of rejection. The various rejection strategies shared by the participants during their free listing were then used as prompts for pile sorting. Participants were asked to organize the types of rejection they identified based on (a) their perceptions of how much emotional hurt the type of rejection caused and (b) the level of compassion perceived in each rejection strategy.

The grouping and placement of the (virtual) cards by the participants were then analyzed as a reflection of that participant’s salience ranking for their listed experiences of rejection. The distance between listed terms within a free list or pile sort can serve as a map that gives the researcher perspective on the hierarchical relationship between the terms being investigated (Yeh, et al., 2014). This distance between items first reflects their coherence within the broader cultural domain. In analyzing free list data, I identified
which terms were coherent by examining their overall frequency within the free listing activity. Terms that were frequently listed, and listed earlier, in the free listing and pile sorting activities across the interviews were considered more likely to have a shared understanding among mobile daters than terms on the periphery that were often listed later and were considered less coherent.

While periphery terms may be interesting, they were ill-suited for research purposes within this study because the meaning of these terms for rejection are less likely to be shared among members of the core cultural group of mobile daters (Gravlee, 1998). Therefore, it was important to further narrow down the core understanding of rejection with a second approach for conceptualizing coherence. The second approach I took to identify the terms for rejection that were within the boundary of the domain was to look for a natural break in the frequency distribution of the terms. These breaks can reflect a boundary between the culturally shared central domain of the concept and the less relevant, or known, terms that could be idiosyncratic (Gravlee, 1998). Scree plots were used to visually represent this approach to interpreting coherence, and these charts are discussed further in the findings within chapter 5. Through these plots, I was able to visually identify which terms for rejection had less support within the sample.

After determining which terms of rejection were coherent, I calculated the salience of these rejection types within the sampled mobile daters. The salience of a term within a cultural domain is calculated by identifying the gross mean percentile rank for each item in the free list across all lists in the sample. The percentile rank for each item is then averaged across the sample to create a salience index, represented as Smith’s S. Terms that are mentioned more frequently, and earlier in the listing, rise to the top of the index while those mentioned less frequently can be identified as less salient (Smith, 1994). In this project, these rankings were calculated by first separating the free list sections of the transcript into a new document. Then, these lists were entered into ANTHROPAC software program to calculate the salience index automatically (Borgatti, 1992). These levels of salience were then compared to descriptions of rejection that emerged within the episodic prompts and other semi-structured interview questions (specific results reflecting the salience ranking of the rejections shared within this study are discussed in the following chapter).

Analysis of rejection episodes. Phenomenological methods rely on experiences shared by participants to understand how they make sense of their experiences. Encouraging participants to disclose
their rejection episodes provided me with many insights into how these daters understood their experiences, the role they played in a rejection, and the factors they considered relevant to their interpretation of rejection. These rejection episodes were shared within the semi-structured interview data collection and prompted through questions like “tell me the story about a rejection you experienced within a mobile dating app?”

For this project, the analysis of these stories was guided by again applying the IPA framework to understand the themes that emerged within these stories. Applying this framework helped me develop an empathic understanding of the identities and experiences of participants. To further contextualize how daters interpreted romantic rejection, the prompts utilized elements of the walkthrough method to interpret how the perceptions of a rejection, like whether it was considerate, ambiguous, or mean-spirited, were tied to the affordances of MDA users (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2016).

Similar to the semi-structured interviews, emerging codes relating to these perceptions and reactions to rejection were drawn from significant statements within these stories. The themes and ideas from the episodes of rejection were then connected back to the broader theoretical literature to better contextualize the descriptions or rejection shared by the mobile daters (Davidsen, 2013). Accurate interpretations form when theoretical constructs, like rejection and failed relationship development attempts, are grounded in an empathic understanding of the responses attuned with the researcher’s own lived experiences (Davidsen, 2013). These theoretical links come from rich descriptions, and the amount of detail shared across the stories were used along with the free-listing analysis to triangulate the interpretations of rejection.

Combining these descriptions of experiences and terms for rejection from the participants allowed me to link existing theoretical explanations regarding rejection, implicit theories, predicted outcomes, and media affordances to these MDA daters’ lived experiences to better understand how these constructs function in mobile communication. The findings derived from this analysis are described in detail in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I first discuss how MDA users identified and defined the types of rejection they experienced. This includes their specific explanations to describe rejections as well as free list and pile sort data that was used to better understand the salience of different types of rejection. Then, I will explain how these daters processed and responded to these instances of rejection during their use of MDAs.

RQ1: Identifying and Classifying Types of Romantic Rejection in Mobile Dating

Throughout the interviews with participants, it became clear that rejection within these spaces is often connected to a rejected dater’s perception of how and why a conversation with a potential partner ended. Importantly, these classifications seemed more connected to the mobile dater’s experience on the application than differences between implicit theories. In exploring research question one, what are the types of rejection experienced by daters within MDAs, daters were asked to define MDA rejection in their own words. Participants would often mention specific acts (like ending interactions), or behaviors (like a gradual slow-down in message response rates), to explain their understanding of rejection in these spaces. Free listing and pile sorting activities were also used to follow up on the various forms of rejection that participants recognized. The detailed descriptions of these rejection types were then used to develop a taxonomy of mobile dating rejection behaviors. Thick descriptions and walkthroughs of rejection events were especially helpful in understanding how rejections were perceived by daters. As they shared their lived experiences, the stories highlighted the emotional impacts and contextual factors related to how people interpret MDA rejections.

Participants’ Definitions of Romantic Rejection

Table 5.1 details the results of free listing, pile sort prompts, and semi-structured interview questions that asked the participants to list and describe the types of rejections they experienced. The most salient and coherent forms of rejection were then organized into different categories based on similarities between rejection strategies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ghosting</td>
<td>Ghosting</td>
<td>The rejector unilaterally decides to stop interacting with the rejectee.</td>
<td>&quot;Ghosting, where all of sudden someone stops talking and responding&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>During the initial interactions on an MDA, the rejector will stop/never respond to in-app text messages.</td>
<td>&quot;Sometimes, more specifically on Tinder, you send your first message and just get completely no response&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left on read</td>
<td></td>
<td>The rejectee can see a rejector has received their message but is choosing not to respond.</td>
<td>&quot;Left on read is you sent a message, and you can get the notification that like they read that, but they never end up responding&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stood up in person</td>
<td></td>
<td>When MDA users believe they have plans to meet in-person, but the rejector never arrives.</td>
<td>&quot;You arrange to meetup in-person at a certain time and place, but they don't like show up... tale as old as time&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Based</td>
<td>Blocking</td>
<td>When a rejector uses the tools within a dating app, or other communication app, to prevent the rejectee from messaging them.</td>
<td>&quot;The person will block you, which you don't know, and then you try to chat them back and you can't chat back&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmatching</td>
<td></td>
<td>A rejector uses the functions within a dating application to remove a match from their profile, deleting the record of the conversation.</td>
<td>&quot;Unmatching is where you, I guess you feel strongly enough about it that you don't want the other person to be able to, look at your profile or talk to you&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreciprocated</td>
<td></td>
<td>Someone indicates they do not want to &quot;match&quot; with your profile during the matchmaking phase.</td>
<td>&quot;Oh, I am actively rejecting this person by left swiping on them.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motives</td>
<td>Different Goals</td>
<td>Identifying that you and the rejector have incompatible interests.</td>
<td>&quot;Some people on the app are just there to hook up...so if you do not want anything sexual that's a form of rejection&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Leading on

The rejector participates in the conversation, but does not try to build a relationship with the rejectee.

"It's implicit in pushing things back. I would say someone's leading you on without ever actually making a commitment."

Direct

Considerate

Rejector tells the rejectee they no longer want to talk in a polite way.

I ended up messaging her a few days later, and she was just like, I had a really nice time, but I don't think we're really looking for the same things

Derogatory

Direct rejections where the rejectee considers the message to be emotionally hurtful, damaging to self-esteem, or abusive.

"I've definitely had boys make a rude comment about my body before on a dating app. I think they're just shitty, I don't think you should say this to anybody online."

Not sharing contact information

When a rejectee asks to move the interaction from a dating app to another platform and the rejector refuses.

"In dating apps, if she doesn't give out personals [contact information, other online accounts], you're not going to get further with her."

As Table 5.1 illustrates, there were five major categories of rejection identified within this study: ghosting, no response, system based, motivational differences, and direct. These categories are discussed in more detail below.

**Ghosting.** Similar to previous research on mobile dating rejection, the mobile daters interviewed in this study reported ghosting as a prevalent form of MDA rejection. In offering examples of ghosting, Maisy, a 19-year-old Asian American who had been active on multiple dating apps over the past year, expressed that ghosting was a common occurrence within these spaces “when people just don’t want to continue any sort of contact with an individual”. This was echoed as Kristie, a white 19-year-old woman who primarily used Bumble, also commented on the rejection strategy, stating “They just stop talking to you, and because it’s behind a, you know, phone, they’re able to do it because you’re not in person”.

This sentiment was shared by most of the interviewees, and there was an understanding that the detached nature of the dating application led to an increased use of impersonal, passive rejection strategies during interactions. Paul, a 20-year-old Asian American man who had been using Tinder, Bumble, and
Hinge for less than a year, argued that these rejections are passive because there is nothing “personal” in the developing relationship. He explained: “I don't owe them an explanation. You know, I'm free to just end it if I feel like it”. In contextualizing their views many daters argued, even as people who had experienced ghosting, the detached nature of these apps makes these rejections feel different than in-person alternatives. This view was similar to destiny mindset daters who were able to quickly move on from these rejections (Freedman, et al., 2018), but among these mobile daters this response to rejection seemed to be related to available alternatives and experience using MDAs.

As noted in the above quotes, mobile daters defined ghosting as the abrupt end to a conversation, but they considered this abrupt ending “ghosting” only if there was a sense of investment in the developing relationship. In fact, the two factors that had the greatest bearing on someone’s interpretation of a ghosting rejection were time and their emotional investment. For example, Paul, a 20-year-old man who had been using multiple MDAs, explained: “ghosting happens after you build rapport, where a lack of responses, you just get shut down from the beginning”. Similarly, Becca, a white 22-year-old woman who had returned to these spaces after a recent break-up, expressed that “you cannot really feel bad if someone stops talking to you on the app after 10 or 15 messages when you are just getting to know them.” These ideas of time and investment relate to Sunnafrank’s (1986) predicted outcome value theory: daters who feel more perceived value from a potential relationship will have a greater emotional impact when that interaction fails to lead to something more. Mobile daters claimed many of the rejections they experienced go unnoticed, but the participants did share multiple factors, like the attractiveness of the potential partner, led to changes in how they define and experience rejection.

When these factors of time and investment are applied to ghosting, it becomes evident that mobile daters can define similar rejection behaviors differently depending on their specific context and perceived investment. For example, LeFebvre defined ghosting as a unilateral decision by a rejector to end communication and withdraw from a rejectee (2017b), but this definition can potentially cover a multitude of similar rejections that rejectees interpret differently depending on when they occur in the development of a potential relationship and how much effort they focused on that person prior to the rejection.

Carley, a 21-year-old white woman who had used Tinder for about two years, explained that a lack of interaction after initially meeting another dater is different than other kinds of rejection that occur in the
build-up to planning an in-person date because “if you never met, then it’s not really amounting to anything anyway”. This sentiment was shared among the interviewees, and many people created distinctions between ghosting—which was seen to happen after there was some sort of established rapport—and other kinds of rejections like “no response” to an initial pickup line, unmatching within the dating app, being “left on read” in a digital conversation or text message exchange, and “being stood up” at an offline date. While interaction time and emotional investment helped create distinctions between rejection types, these events were also defined by MDA users by their ambiguity.

When mobile daters are left trying to determine if they have been ghosted, many oscillate between thoughts of outright rejection or rationalizing if the person they are talking to was just unavailable at that time. This sentiment was conveyed by Adam, a 24-year-old white man who used multiple dating apps over his six years of mobile dating, when he explained:

*The ghosting thing, it’s kind of a mix. It’s very ambiguous up to that point...I don’t know if it’s because they’re using it as a mechanism to reject or they’re actually interested, but it’s [the interaction] not the priority of the moment.*

Reasoning through why ghosting is happening can be quite hard for mobile daters due to the passive nature of the rejection. However, even if the rejector’s motivations behind the act are confusing, the rejection itself becomes clear to many daters. As they found themself spiraling in dating limbo, ghosting itself was identified as a form of rejection when daters had not received a response within a few days. Using their understanding of availability within mobile dating, the participants reasoned that because these apps (and the lives of rejectors in general) are so reliant on mobile devices it is extremely unlikely the potential partner does not have their phone near them. This realization helped them distinguish ghosting from other forms of MDA passive rejection, defined below.

*“No response,” “left on read”, and being stood up.* The amount of time and energy daters spent within interactions helped them differentiate among similar kinds of rejections. *No response* rejections occurred when they sent an initial message to a potential partner and never heard anything back. Being “left on read” was also similar to ghosting in that there was no response from the other dater, but it differed in that it occurred very early on in interaction exchanges on the app, or on off-MDA channels like Snapchat, Instagram, or iMessage. Alex, a white 21-year-old man who switched between Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge, defined being left on read as when “they acknowledge your message but chose not to respond”. Daters
were able to identify being "left on read" through various app features like time stamps and read receipts that record when a message was seen by a receiver. The most extreme examples of non-response as rejection were often ones where an offline/physical date was planned, but then the rejected dater was stood up. Liana, a 24-year-old Latina who had used multiple dating apps over approximately five years, shared that the rejection of being stood-up could be quite hurtful because of the time involved in setting up the date:

*By the time I want to go with someone on a date, we've probably gotten to know each other, and if they really don't want to meet me after all of that, and they like stand me up, you weren't honest. You said you would do something and then you don't do it.*

Rejections where the rejectee felt they had wasted their time were often viewed as frustrating and disrespectful, and this negative experience often stemmed from more developed interactions that involved greater investment.

**System-based rejection: Blocking, unmatching, and unreciprocated swipes.** Other rejections occurred through the features within MDAs and social applications. *Blocking* was defined by mobile daters as an act taken by a rejector to remove a rejectee from their dating app space in response to specific negative behaviors, such as derogatory comments or unwanted advances and sexual images. This strategy was recognized by rejected daters the most when the blocking happened on a social app like Snapchat or Instagram. Alex, a white 21-year-old man who switched between Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge, provided an example of how he recognized this rejection in his story "Taco Night":

*I was just very confused because I thought that things had gone really well. And then they didn't give any other feedback besides that, and that culminated with a block on Instagram after I had sent a message questioning why they felt that way just because, like morbid curiosity.*

Here, Alex can tell he had been blocked because he previously received specific messages from the other dater through the Instagram application chat and then had a system message appear, such as a notification he could no longer communicate or view the other’s profile, which he interpreted as a blocking rejection. Within social media applications, the rejectee could tell blocking occurred because the app’s design makes it clear that the rejector still exists on the platform but has used specific privacy features to stop communication via social media. When blocking happens within MDAs, however, many rejected daters had a hard time distinguishing between blocking and unmatching.
Similar to blocking, when a dater is *unmatched* in the MDA, the record of the previous interaction is deleted by the system. The rejected person often does not know rejection has occurred until they notice the conversation is missing from their application. This type of rejection is best illustrated by an example shared by Luke, a 22-year-old Italian American man who used Tinder and Bumble, explained:

> You're talking to the person, you feel like you're hitting it off, and then all of a sudden you sign out of the app for a little bit and then you go back into it you can’t find your conversation... It’s like, 'Oh, no, I just lost them. What did I do wrong?'

While MDA users may go back and try to find an unmatched interaction if they thought things were going well, often unmatching can happen so quickly it is barely noticeable. As Liam (a 21-year-old white man who had been introduced to MDAs after his previous relationship ended within the last year) mentioned, some apps like Bumble build unmatching into the platform as a specific feature that removes the possibility of mutual interactions from the app if both daters do not participate within 24 hours, and these kinds of *system-generated unmatching* “rejections” were often rationalized as missed connections where daters’ schedules just did not line up. Additionally, there was also *immediate unmatching* which Liam contrasted as instances when, “you realized you've lowered your standards a little bit below what you really wanted to the last time that you were swiping and you, you changed your mind about the other person”. While a dater rejected in this way may not know where that match went within the app, participants who recognized this kind of immediate unmatching rejection argued it did not lead to any negative feelings as “miss-swipes” can happen.

The third type of system-based rejection was *unreciprocated swipes*. In these instances, a dater would swipe right on the profile of another mobile dater (indicating interest), but not immediately receive a notification that the other person liked them as well. This mutual liking is important because in many apps, conversations cannot start until the daters have signaled their mutual interest through swipes. As time continued to move on, daters become increasingly discouraged as they imagine the match notification will never come. Byron, a 20-year-old African American man who used Tinder and Badoo, explained “when you start swiping right. ...you only get maybe a one or two matches a day. So that kind of tells a lot of people probably not interested in you because you don't get a lot of matches”. Even though the lack of matches could be discouraging within applications, many people did not dwell on specific people they did not match with. As Vihaan, a 25-year-old South Asian man who used multiple MDAs, illustrated when talking
on the subject, “all you did was swipe right…no time or effort was truly put in.” More often than not, daters did not recognize they were being swiped left because they did not really have an effective way to recognize these rejections were happening. Many factors, such as not having overlapping location settings, inactive accounts, or just infrequent app use, could factor into not being swiped or selected by a specific person.

**Different relational motives.** Along these lines, some rejections were harder to identify initially and often uncovered through further interactions with the potential partner. One of the most prevalent rejections of this type was daters’ realization that they had different goals than the person they were talking to. Although these kinds of rejections may not be accompanied by overt statements outlining their specific differences, they still felt like rejections to the mobile daters who had initially believed they had the same relational goals and desires. This sentiment was represented by a statement from Anise, a 19-year-old Iraqi American woman who used Tinder. She explained that often daters who were not upfront about their goals on dating apps have ulterior motives:

*If you say you want a relationship, but really you are just trying to hook up with them, that's being shady. Or, if you, say you want a relationship and you have someone in the picture and they don't tell! When they're not open and honest, that's being shady.*

Often these mismatched goal realizations, like recognizing the other person only wanted a short-term relationship or casual sex, impacted how these daters felt about themselves and the apps in general.

Similarly, people who felt like a developing relationship was fizzling out because of a difference in effort between them and their rejector also felt rejected in early interactions. Often, recognizing this shift in reciprocity and tone within text-based interactions could be challenging for app users. However, as they experienced more rejection on these apps, the nature of these fading interactions become clearer through an understanding of availability within application. Kristie, a 19-year-old who had used these apps for a year and a half, explained:

*Usually [you] can tell because the complete, tone switch and the way that they’re talking to you, or maybe they’re not texting you as quickly as they have been all day, and then all of a sudden at night. They are like, hey, this isn't really working. Or I don't want to meet up, or sometimes they don't even always tell you, they just kind of slowly stop talking to you.*

Some mobile daters argued that these rejection situations where both daters just grew disinterested can feel like a “mutual rejection”. Layla, a 20-year-old white woman who had recently shifted from Tinder towards Bumble and Hinge, argued these “fizzing interactions” are common place and not really impactful enough to have their own story. Even if they were not satisfied with the interaction fading away, many
mobile daters suggested against trying to force interactions within the apps. Liana, a 24-year-old Latina who had experienced these kinds of interactions on multiple apps, shared that picking up on social cues from rejectors within the app is important, and trying to get a thorough explanation for a rejection can lead to worse outcomes for both parties.

One of the most challenging rejections for participants to recognize was identifying if they had been led on by someone who never actually intended to have a relationship with them. Daters shared two types of leading on during their interviews: leading on by talking for emotional gratification and leading on by never setting plans to meet in-person. Regarding the first kind of leading on, participants recounted exchanges with other mobile daters who seemed motivated to carry on conversations only to boost their own egos. These encounters were very frustrating, especially for those who were looking to develop romantic relationships. Rejected daters perceived these individuals as just being on the apps for self-serving reasons, such as trying to fish for compliments from attractive potential partners in order to get a boost in self-esteem. These rejectors may claim they use MDAs solely to have casual (i.e., non-romantic) conversations, but making themselves the topic of conversation while failing to reciprocate interest felt disingenuous to the rejected daters. Even though some mobile daters were fine with the prospect of having casual conversations through these apps, many felt that there needed to be a clear, up-front declaration of motivations and intentions for using MDAs. Thus, this form of leading on reflects mis-matched relational goals.

Liam, a 21-year-old white man who encountered these kinds of leading on interactions when he first started using these apps, explained that these rejectors were “okay with having a conversation as long it doesn’t lead to an actual relationship being developed”, but when they strung these conversations along without making their lack of relationship motivation clear, the conversation ended up being “a miserable form of rejection”. Even experienced mobile daters can have difficulty picking up on these self-serving conversations, as Liana, a 24-year-old Latina who used dating apps for multiple years, explained:

This week in particular, I was asking all of the questions… then I was like, Wait a minute. Why am I doing this, where I have not been asked a single question about myself? It feels like I'm just congratulating them on going to Harvard.

This lack of reciprocity, in which both daters are expected to ask personal questions, offer self-disclosures, and move the relationship along, felt like an inconsiderate approach to mobile dating and a form of rejection.
The second form of leading on came from interactions that progressed further than initial sharing of goals and interests. In this rejection, rejectees felt like the person was interested in them but kept being evasive when arranging a time to meet in-person. Like being stood up for a date, many participants reported experiencing frustration and feeling upset when they recognized they were talking to a person who did not intend to meet them offline. This realization could take a long time to materialize, as many daters are willing to give their conversation partner the benefit of the doubt, hoping the potential partner is just temporarily busy. Daters could fall into this mindset often if they considered their rejector particularly attractive or interesting. Adam, a 24-year-old white man, described this strategy as “passive denial” and explained, “it's significantly passive as compared to other things…Which makes it sound like active. But it's not explicit. It's implicit in pushing things back.” These kinds of leading on rejections were often described as being more emotional for participants because of the time and investment previously spent on these interactions. Vihaan, a 25-year-old South Asian man, shared that he watched his friend go through this kind of mobile dating rejection and claimed:

*Because you're putting in the most time and effort into this individual, the emotional, the mental, and the physical toll it takes. Now it's prolonging over an extended period of time versus, you know, one to two weeks of a first date.*

In this kind of leading on, the anticipation of a date, and the hope that things are working out, can make the rejection feel worse when it finally happens.

**Direct message refusals.** Rejections could also come as clear, direct messages sent from the rejector. These direct messages could be statements telling the rejected dater that the budding relationship was not going to work out. Evie, a 22-year-old Hispanic woman who used Bumble and Hinge, outlined how these direct rejections could “suck because you really like the person, but the upfront explanation helps you understand that it would not have worked out in the long run.” Even though these daters had high expectations for relationship success, the direct message alleviated the sense of hurt feelings. These direct rejections could come during conversations over app, or they could be direct rejections that occurred after meeting someone in-person. Carl, a 23-year-old white man who primarily used Bumble, explained the only times he received direct rejection during his MDAs experience were, “after I've actually gone on a date with this person, and they are saying that they just weren't really feeling it or weren't interested at that point in time”.
Although many participants thought these direct rejections were kinder than other rejections, they also lamented how they were not very prevalent within mobile dating. This was especially true during the impersonal early interactions on the dating apps themselves. As Layla, a 20-year-old white woman, explained, “telling the person, I feel that’s really nice in a way. I feel like it doesn’t really happen on those apps… usually it's just ends.” However, just because a rejection was direct does not mean that a rejection was kind—or “other-oriented”. In fact, the hurtful nature of direct rejection could also lead to their higher salience, despite their (relatively) less frequent occurrence.

These direct derogatory comments were usually messages rejectors sent that were hurtful to the rejectee’s self-esteem. Mark, a 21-year-old white mobile dater who had been using multiple MDAs for more than two years, shared that there are some people on these apps who are just “terrible people” and “want to cause some sort of ill will or hard feelings towards someone”. However, these kinds of hurtful direct rejections were even less common than considerate direct rejections. When they were encountered, it was often by female mobile daters who felt degraded by sexually explicit messages they received in MDA interactions. Kanti, a 20-year-old Bengali woman who used Tinder and Dil Mil, described that sexual messages directed towards women were a common occurrence that felt like “a different form of rejection where you're not getting what you expect. So you're kind of like, just being seen as an object”. Many women reported that these types of rejection were more likely to occur on Tinder, and trying to avoid messages like this led mobile daters to leave this MDA and join more long-term relationship focused apps, like Bumble and Hinge.

The final form of direct rejection came from interactions when daters would ask for contact information, such as a phone number or social media username, and receive a rejection from their conversation partner. These rejections stood apart from other direct rejections because moving off the dating apps onto another form or channel of communication was seen as an important step in relationship development for mobile daters. Dennis, a 21-year-old Italian American who used Tinder and Bumble, illustrated how these requests could lead to rejection:

*Imagine you ask them for their Snapchat 'cause you can either text or send pictures obviously on Snapchat, or their phone number and they respond, ‘oh, it's too soon for that,’ or something like that, then they don't wanna talk to you anymore.*
In this form of rejection, we see that the multimodality affordance meant a lot to the participants. From the male daters’ perspective, moving to a different app meant the other person was actually interested in talking to them. Paul, a 20-year-old Asian American man, explained that regardless of the application the conversation occurred on, “if I don’t get personals [contact information] I just stop going further with the conversation. Cuz you know, it’s it’s like meaningless. Why am I here wasting my time with this person or why are they here?”. Similarly, women also considered moving off the apps to be an important step. However, they often took conversations off the app because they had notifications turned off on their dating apps, or their dating app messaging features had become “buggy” because of an abundance of matches and conversations. This suggests a more technical (as opposed to relational) motivation for multimodality. Evie, a 22-year-old Hispanic woman, shared how moving off the app was a way to actually start to have a real conversation with someone:

*I have had quite a few, like, problems with actually getting notifications of people messaging me. So sometimes it’s a glitch in the app, or I just flat out don’t wanna talk through that app. I’d rather have iMessage, I’d rather you know, see my messages delivered and read and everything.*

Salience of Rejection Strategies

The free listing activities were essential to exploring the first research question. Table 5.2 below lists the 15 types of rejections that were mentioned most frequently among the participants during the free listing activity. These saliences of these terms were based on their Smith’s S coefficient, and the cohesiveness of the domain was determined by evaluating the frequency a strategy was mentioned across the population. A scree plot was used to visualize the citation of rejection strategies by these mobile daters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Resp. %</th>
<th>Avg. Rank</th>
<th>Smith’s S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>GHOSTING</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>80.49</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>0.5902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>53.66</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>0.2652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>UNMATCHING</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41.46</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>0.2766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>NO RESPONSE</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36.59</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>0.3093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>UNRECIPROCATED SWIPE</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36.59</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>0.2892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>LEAVING ON READ</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36.59</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>0.2252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>BLOCKING</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31.71</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>0.1867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>DIFFERENT GOALS</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31.71</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>0.1119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>NO SPARK</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29.27</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>0.1630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>LEADING ON: IN-APP EMOTIONAL GRATIFICATION</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19.51</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.0861</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On average, participants listed five different types of rejection they had experienced, heard about, or thought about within their use of these apps. The most salient form of rejection was ghosting, which was listed by approximately 80% of the mobile daters in this sample. There was a clear first break in salience between ghosting (0.5902) and direct rejections (0.2652), and a noticeable second break in salience between “not having a spark” (0.1630) and feeling rejected by someone using the app for their own emotional gratification (0.0861). This salience ranking of direct rejections is especially interesting when compared to the reported lack of direct rejection by the participants. This inconsistency between citing direct rejection and daters’ describing them as infrequent during interviews may occur due to the fact these kinds of direct rejections stand out more in the mind of participants because they are less likely to occur. These breaks in salience helped identify the borders of this cultural domain of rejection, and they are illustrated in Figure 5.1.
Definitional Similarities and Differences among Types of Rejection

After listing the specific types of rejections, the participants were asked to group their listed rejections together by similarities and differences as part of the pile sort activity. The results of these grouping activities are presented in Table 5.3. *Unmatching* and *blocking* were grouped together the most, (i.e., 20% of the time), during these pile sorts. These mobile daters shared that even though the rejector may take different actions for each kind of rejection, the ensuing result for the rejected dater is usually the same: the history of the interaction disappears on the dating app. *Ghosting* was grouped with these other two kinds of rejections 20% of the time as well, with participants comparing the lack of interaction and high ambiguity of ghosting with blocking and unmatching. In sum, it was not always clear why someone ghosted, unmatched, or blocked, and this made it challenging for daters to learn from these kinds of rejections. As Mark, a white 21-year-old man who used multiple applications, explained, encountering a rejection that did not have clear closure made him “curious why, like for my own knowledge, is there something that I could, that I could change about myself that would make them or other people more interested or something like that.” Moving on from these ambiguous rejections could be challenging, but MDA users often pointed out that people became more accustomed to these types of rejection over time.

**Table 5.3: Pile Sort - Frequency of Rejection Co-Occurrence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of rejection</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Ghosting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Direct</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C. No Response</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Unrecip. Swipe</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Unmatching</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Blocking</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Different Goals</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Leaving on Read</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. No spark</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Leading on</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K. No sharing info</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Stood up</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Derog. comments</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. In-person</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Correlations represent similarity groupings for rejection types.

*Direct rejections* were grouped with *in-person rejections* in 17% of pile sorts. This may be because many daters did not consider a direct response necessary in mobile dating unless the relationship had progressed into more thoughtful or developed message exchanges. Maisy, a 19-year-old Asian American
woman, explained that the rapid development and plentiful alternatives within MDAs made it inefficient and unnecessary to formally reject a dater that she had only been talking to on the app. She explained:

*The point is that like, everything moves quickly...if there's a point where it progresses to, like, real life face-to-face interaction, that is the point where I actually have to reject someone, but if you only ever chatted online, then there's no need.*

Many daters echoed this sentiment—that there is no expectation to formalize the ending of these interactions because the rejectee is not known well enough to be owed an explanation.

Curiously, direct rejections were often grouped with ghosting (.17), unmatching (.14), and “no spark” (.14) rejections as well. This may be because of the stronger emotional impact that these forms of rejection had on rejectees. Carl, a 23-year-old white man, illustrated that these kinds of rejections often happened later in more developed interaction exchanges:

*The later ones hurt more because you know, you have talked with this person about their interests and gotten to like understand them as an individual a little bit better and maybe started to feel some sort of like start to a connection.*

When the interviewees were grouping these rejections based on how much they were hurt by them, these cited rejections that happen after some rapport were considered the most impactful.

No response and leaving people on read were also grouped together (.14), and given their relative similarities, this grouping makes good sense. Both forms of rejection are passive and occur early in MDA interactions, as Luke, a 22-year-old Italian American man, said when describing these strategies, “then I mean, they could just plain stop talking, or maybe I'll send them two, three messages...But yeah, they just stopped talking all of a sudden, I bet probably 80-85% of men who use dating apps experience that.” It was not just men, but all mobile daters in these apps illustrated that early non-response rejections were very common. Many participants shared that the majority of rejections with MDAs are often interpreted when communication just stops. Over time, daters claimed that they become numb to these types of rejections, as Kristie a 19-year-old white woman, illustrates:

*I used to get really frustrated when a guy would just stop talking to me... But most of it happens. They they just stop talking to you. You'll be in the middle of a conversation and they just never message you again.*

Even though Kristie explained these rejections were not too hurtful after using these apps for over a year, she also claimed to be confused and frustrated when experiencing these passive rejections in her early days on MDAs.
As individuals become acclimated to the types of rejection within mobile dating, they devise strategies to help them move through their frequent experiences of rejection. While similar to the learning of growth and destiny implicit theories, these frameworks of understanding differ in that they seem more grounded in the daters’ understandings of the affordances of the app and their expectations for relational success. These differences in the way individuals experience and understand rejections within dating apps are examined further in the following section where I will explain how the episodes of rejection that participants shared helped uncover the interpretive process they used to define and classify the various rejections they encountered on the apps. In this analysis, I will also illustrate how these distinctions in various forms of romantic rejection led to important implications regarding the experience of rejection within mobile dating.

**RQ 2: Experiencing and Processing Rejection**

In exploring the second research question, *how do MDA users experience rejection within dating applications*, the shared rejection episodes and explanations of rejection from these daters helped identify how they construct an understanding of MDA rejection. Following the IPA procedure described above, I began by reviewing participants’ episodic descriptions provided in the interview data. After identifying potential themes, I then refined these into a final condensed list of themes, keeping in mind the sensitizing rejection frameworks reviewed earlier as well as my own researcher biases and perspectives. The descriptions shared by daters were then categorized to better reflect the themes within their stories of rejection. Significant quotations from the stories were selected to help highlight the approaches daters used to make sense of rejection. From this analysis, I found that MDA users apply *processing strategies* related to their classification of a rejection, their emotional response, and the perceived affordances within the app. These processing strategies helped them make sense of their past rejection experiences within MDAs, and also informed their future (anticipated) use.

**Processing the Signals of Rejection**

**Ambiguity.** To better identify and interpret when ambiguous rejection was occurring, MDA users developed strategies to help them recognize rejection from their experience and app use. To recognize when they could be rejected by people who had different goals or were looking for different relational outcomes, mobile daters learned to identify language and presentational strategies within profiles in the
MDA that alluded to relational “red flags.” Similar to other implicit theories based on perceptions of behavior, these warranting strategies were tied to a user’s sense of the visibility affordance. Liam, a 21-year-old white man, explains how visibility affordances can be implemented to avoid rejection: “I'm consciously thinking about a person's personality and an emotional connection, because I need to scroll through their personality content and their quick little descriptions of themselves in order to get to know them.”

Scrutinizing others' profiles often happened before swiping, and learning more through others’ bios could provide helpful suggestions for conversation, as well as signals for daters’ intentions and motives for being on the app. Moreover, understanding how to identify cues within a potential partner’s profile helped daters form better expectations and predicted outcomes regarding their relationship attempts.

Similar to previous research on warranting and uncertainty reduction in online dating (DeAndrea, 2014; Gibbs, et al., 2010), some users also used the limited information available to them within the MDA profile to find the social media profiles of potential dates. The motivation for this warranting strategy is explained by Maisy, a 19-year-old Asian American woman, who shared:

*I always, especially if I’m going to meet up with someone, look them up on Facebook because who doesn't Facebook these days? Especially within like the age range that I'm dating in...you can see that they have friends on those other profiles. It's like oh, this is a real person.*

While some users expressed these practices were habits they brought with them to the dating app from in-person dating, others echoed that they picked them up over time as they experienced rejection on MDAs.

MDA users also tried to gauge whether they were being rejected by the response time of the people they were interacted with. Many users viewed a “fizzling out” of conversation as an indication that they were being ghosted or left on read. This change in tone in the interaction was captured by a quote from Riya, a 24-year-old Asian American woman:

*I've had situations where I would talk to you for two weeks, and then they drop a text, so then you're like, oh, maybe they were busy. But then we talked for a little bit and then you get, again, two weeks...rejection but very drawn out.*

When rejections started to become drawn out, daters approached this extended ambiguity through their understanding of availability within these applications. Internal tensions arose as rejected daters started to rationalize that their rejector likely still had a mobile device but were either choosing not to interact with them specifically or were no longer on the MDA. This confusion about where they stood with their prospective partners lead to the implementation of strategies to alleviate relational ambiguity.
One of the strategies rejected daters employed in response to this ambiguity was to make up their own rationale for why a conversation spontaneously ended. Some mobile daters embraced the ambiguity present in rejections like being left on read and not being swiped on to contextualize and process why the rejection happened. Liam, a 21-year-old white man, described this strategy was helpful “cause no response kind of leaves open the idea. There's still a chance, regardless of how long either party waits there- there's still a chance 'cause there's an open dialogue, a conversation that it's still open for both parties”. This response to ambiguous rejection is similar in some regards to people who have a destiny mindset who are apt to ignore signs of rejection if they view the potential receiver as a valuable relationship partner (Knee, et al., 2004). This rationalization of ghosting may only be on the rejectees mind until a more promising prospect enters the picture within the MDA, after which they move on from the “open dialogue”.

Rationalizations to ambiguous responses also came in handy when daters tried to understand why they were not swiped on. As this example from Tonya, a 19- year-old African American woman, illustrates: “If you know that you swipe someone and then you just never get a match, it's easy to in your own head say 'oh, well maybe they just never saw me' or something like that.” This conceptualization of the affordances in MDAs extends what the mobile dater knows about availability, locatability, and visibility within the apps and applies it to explain a rejection. Were we in overlapping geographic areas? Are they on the application anymore? Did the application algorithm even show my profile to them? All of these are factors considered by mobile daters who explained why they were not being “right swiped” within dating apps. In this way, ambiguity within the MDA can be recontextualized through a combination of affordances as a series of “missed opportunities” instead of specific instances of rejection.

Other early exchanges were less ambiguous and made it clear the interaction on the app would not lead towards a relationship. For instance, Vihaan, a 25-year-old South Asian man, shared that if potential partners are not willing to move off the app, they definitely are not trying to build a relationship, “if you provide your social media info, it's another step, you're moving on to another platform to have conversation. And some people may not want to take that step. So they just ignore you”. Multimodality was an important signal within MDA rejection interpretation, as moving from the MDA to texting, or direct messaging on other social apps like Snapchat and Instagram, was seen as a critical step in relational development. As daters tried to move from initial discovery phase interactions to in-person dates, the
interactions within other channels afforded an opportunity to develop a better understanding of the prospective partner. Moreover, moving from the MDA to another communication channel was seen as a watershed moment. Thus, any rejections experienced after this point were often seen as more impactful. The way participants worked through these emotional effects was also related to their understanding of the affordances within MDAs and their prior experiences.

**Emotional processing and responses to rejection.** Whether it was clearly verbalized or not, a sign that a person did not want to further develop a connection was often disappointing, but participants often shared they were able to move on from the rejections that happened early on in the developmental stage because it felt like more of a relief to get rejected in the app than when they were texting, snapping, or direct messaging in another social media space. Moving from the dating app to a different platform carries with it new expectations and predictions for relationship success, and as Paul, a 20-year-old Asian American man, explained, “if someone doesn’t want to do it, then just stop talking, I don’t want to waste anyone else’s time, and I don’t want to waste my time especially.”

When confronted with rejection, many mobile daters responded by moving on to the next available conversation. Often, these individuals would be encountering multiple rejections simultaneously during their app use. As mobile daters experienced more rejections within the applications, they became more familiar with the different patterns that seemed to lead towards rejection. Even though this did not make behaviors, like ghosting, less ambiguous when it came to identifying why someone would ghost, these experiences did help daters learn to identify when rejection had occurred. Recognizing rejection and understanding what had happened were related to how participants reacted emotionally to MDA rejections.

Globally, some rejections were more likely to elicit stronger feelings from mobile daters than others, but there were some emotional responses that were common among the episodes of rejection shared by the participants. The most common response was a general sense of hurt. Consistent with aforementioned research, Richman and Leary (2009) explain that hurt feelings are common after experiencing a rejection. This sensation of hurt feelings encapsulates a lot of similar emotions to what was described by the participants in this study. As Byron, a 20-year-old African American man, explained:

*The one you aren’t going to be offended by is the one that you really are not going to know. If they didn’t tell you they aren’t interested, if they told you you weren’t their type, that will hurt your feelings.*
While this general sense of hurt feelings was present in many episodes and descriptions of rejections, some rejections impacted people differently because of the events surrounding their rejection.

As Maisy, a 19-year-old Asian American woman, described when discussing various forms of rejection within apps, "it really kind of depends on the person, because some people prefer just, like, to be ghosted because it's easier, and most people also prefer to ghost people." Tonya, a 19-year-old African American woman, echoed these observations and furthered that being on the receiving end of rejection often lead to a loss of self-esteem as she tried to find out what was wrong about how she presented herself or why she could not find a date. However, many people who had more extensive experience with dating apps described situations in which they were often confused, frustrated, or disappointed when they experienced a rejection. This was especially true if the rejection was ambiguous, as Liana, a 24-year-old Latina, described when discussing an experience where she had been ghosted:

I was like, gosh, what did I do? What did I say that was wrong? (laughs) 'cause you can think of so many reasons in your head why they rejected you. Was it what I was wearing that you're like, ugh, I don't like a girl like that? Or is it like qualities about me that I can't change?

This confusion could also lead to frustration with the apps themselves. As Evie, a 22-year-old Hispanic woman, described when explaining why her app use is frequently "on and off":

I kind of just get exhausted of swiping and meeting new people and having the same conversation over and over with somebody, which is always, you know, getting to know them, and then usually doesn't really go quite go anywhere, so you get kind of sick of having that over and over.

In some circumstances, mounting frustration could lead users to removing themselves from the app entirely. As Becca, a 22-year-old white woman, described, "I have friends, not just guy friends, girlfriends, and they just delete it. And I think that just like is a formal rejection to the whole community". These steps away from the app often happened after a particularly disappointing rejection. However, similar to patterns of use Grindr users described in Brubaker, et al. (2016), leaving an MDA is not always permanent, and re-entry into the MDA setting is tied to perceived future success. Carl, a 23-year-old white man, shared a story about how after he was rejected by someone he felt a strong connection with, he was disappointed; however, he still returned to the apps eventually:

I took a week break after that just because in Seattle, it was a lot harder to get matches. So the online dating experience was a little bit more frustrating there. Pretty much universally. So I kind of just took a little break and came back to it eventually.
Even though prior reports on the demographic makeup of MDAs illustrate the balance between men and women is relatively even (Anderson, et al., 2020), this perceived competition over matches was described as a factor that made mobile dating more frustrating.

As noted above, daters reported direct, considerate rejections as less frequent in the mobile dating environment, but when they were experienced, daters expressed that they often felt like they understood where the rejector was coming from. Alex, a 21-year-old white man, explained in one of his stories that he appreciated his direct rejection because, “they treated me like another human being, they didn’t leave me in the up in the air wondering what was like going to happen… just very clear, the language was very like thoughtful.” Comparatively, experiencing these rejections did not impact mobile daters the same way emotionally as more ambiguous rejections. This clarity helped people identify the conversation had run its course and it was time to move on. This sentiment is expressed in Becca’s description of a direct rejection she received, “if it’s quick and it's just a date, like one day, it's like, ‘Hey, don't talk to me again.’ I get it. Obviously you didn't have a good time. I can pick up on that”. When daters described their direct considerate rejections, they explained that they usually went right back into the apps and may have felt slightly hurt for a short period of time.

In rarer circumstances, a rejection from someone met through an MDA could lead a dater to be angry or sad. In the stories where daters left the rejection feeling mad, they expressed that they felt used or taken advantage of because the person who rejected them ended up having different goals than they initially expressed. Adam’s episode illustrates his reaction to this experience:

I was pretty angry. I think that’s part of consent in a relationship, you need to know what’s going on in their life. If someone’s fleeing back from someone, and you know that that might be an unsure type of thing with a temporary break, usually people are honest about that sort of thing.

In this instance, Adam and the person who rejected him had met a few times, had sex, and he believed they were starting to move towards a relationship. A similar story was shared by Kristie, a white 19-year-old woman, who ended up feeling rejected when she figured out the guy she was dating just wanted to have casual sex: “I was really angry about it. And I would tell my friends about it and I was just like, ‘oh just one of those Tinder things’”. In both of these stories, and others like them, the daters explained that the rejections tied to having different goals in mind for the “relationship” hurt more if they had invested a lot of time, effort, and emotional expectations into the relationship.
Rejections that happened earlier on in the discovery phase, such as not receiving a response to an initial pick-up line or being left-swiped, often did not lead to the same sense of “hurt feelings” generated by ghosting and inconsiderate rejections. Evie, a 22-year-old Hispanic woman, details how when she experienced rejection, “if it’s in the first couple days, it’s not really a problem because you didn’t really know that person. So you’re not really missing anything, you don’t really care”, and this sentiment was echoed across other daters as well. Time spent talking to a person, investing emotional resources, and developing feelings created more impactful rejections. This relationship between time and rejections is summed up well in an explanation from Alex, a white 21-year-old white man:

> Once the IRL [in real life] component actually starts, being ghosted just like kind of hurts no matter what point it is. I'd say it has the highest… think of a floor and like a ceiling. It has like the highest floor like almost like at the bare minimum it'll still hurt like X amount than the others, but then also the ceiling of it would be higher. It also has the point to become instead of hurtful, it can be like excruciatingly painful.

This quotation also demonstrates how a rejection felt on the app was related to the time daters spent interacting with the other person previously, as well as how long that dater had been active on the MDA platform.

**Processing rejection through time, investment, and perceived value.** When mobile daters talked about their rejection experiences, they illustrated how time played an important role in their interpretation of, and responses to, rejection. Rejections from someone later on in the discovery phase, or after meeting in-person, felt worse than rejections in the matchmaking stage. Overall, no response rejections seemed confined to early-stage interactions, in which a mobile dater would send a pick-up line or greeting to start a conversation that either would fail to elicit an initial response or end suddenly after a small number of message exchanges. These were the most common rejections that people encountered, and they had little impact on mobile daters. As Mark, a 21- year-old white man, shared, “if you had been talking for maybe 30 minutes and then they just stop, that’s less of a big deal”.

Comparatively, many participants reported feeling some sense of hurt or disappointment in response to being left on read or ghosted. In these rejections, conversations had moved beyond initial interactions, or they had become multimodal, moving off the dating app and onto other channels. This increased emotional response may be because daters can get caught up in these conversations and
perceive higher degrees of mutual attraction then are actually present. Riya, a 24-year-old Asian American woman, illustrates this issue in her rejection story titled “Reasons why my Bumble radius is not 50 miles”:

We texted in the morning before work, and then we texted in the evening when we got back from work. And then he ghosted me after one month. I really got infatuated with this guy. And I had no… I didn’t realize I was infatuated with him until I stopped talking to him. I felt stupid and lost. I talked to him for one month and then he stopped talking to me, so I left Bumble alone for one month. It was kind of embarrassing. It took me a while to get back on my horse.

This example illustrates that the greater time spent interacting with someone met on a MDA can deepen the intensity of rejection, but the story shared by Riya also suggests that it is the amount of emotional investment or value the rejectee puts into the developing relationship that affects how they process and react to the rejection. The sense of mutual investment in the value of a developing relationship (and the ensuing impact) helped distinguish ghosting from leaving people on read. Ghosting was something that happened after daters had developed rapport and were moving toward in-person dating. Leaving on read happened only in text-based interactions, on or off dating apps, where daters had read receipts that allowed them to identify if someone had seen their message. While being left on read was considered rude, these relationships had not developed to the point where the rejectee felt they were entitled to an explanation for why the relationship would not progress further. Anise, a 19-year-old Iraqi American woman, explains that “falling off” was often just surprising:

I'm not gonna go around and be like, 'hey, like, you should respond to me because I like, I gave you my snapchat and like, we've been talking for this long because that's just like rude.' But like, that's honestly the case.

With regard to time, passive rejections that happened later in the development of a dating relationship were harder for rejectees to process. This sentiment is echoed by Vihaan, a 25-year-old South Asian man, who argued, “It causes the most pain because you're spending the most time with the individual and you're spending a lot of effort, but to no avail. It's based on the success and how much time and effort you're putting in”. More so than other rejections, people who experienced ghosting after building a relationship through an MDA felt like the entire experience was a waste of time. As Liana explained in her story about a ghosting rejection:

I could have bugged him about it obviously, been like, hey, do you still want to hang out? But you know part of ghosting is that that's the rejection. Ghosting is a rejection. So if you try to get that person to talk to you, part of why they ghosted is they can't say “no”. They can't say like, “hey, I'm not interested” …that's exactly what ghosting is. So, I obviously was hurt about it. And I was like, gosh, I wasted so much time.
Even though these instances when a mobile dater felt like they were rejected by someone they felt a strong connection to were rare, these singular events were often the focus of participants’ rejection examples shared during the interviews. These passive rejections that happened after a perceived relational investment with a potential partner that was valued were also the most likely to make participants feel disappointed, sad, and/or frustrated. Anise, a 19-year-old Iraqi American woman, explained how the combination of passive rejections and this sense of wasted time mattered to mobile daters:

If you’re just dragging us on, this better be worth it or else. Because time you can’t get back. If you’re wasting my time, I don’t think anyone would be happy about it. But like I like I value time a lot. So like, if someone’s wasting it, I will get upset.

The abruptness of these passive rejections impacts the emotions of rejected daters because they predicted fostering a relationship with their rejectors. As Kristie, a 19-year-old woman, described, after being ghosted she, “was feeling down because he piqued my interest like very quickly and I really did like him. And then it just went away. Quickly as it came.” Many participants echoed that this lack of resolution in passive rejections that were more developed made it harder to move on to the next potential relationship in the app.

These episodes of rejection help illustrate the factors that influence an MDA user’s perceptions of a rejection and their emotional response to being rejected. There are multiple dimensions of an act of rejection and identifying where a rejection falls along these aspects can help contextualize how these acts occur within MDAs. In the following section, I will define these elements of rejection and explain how they were used to discover emergent differences in the way men and women processed rejections within MDAs.

Various Dimensions of MDA Rejection

Unlike the growth and destiny implicit theory appraisals, participants shared that they made sense of the various kinds of rejections they experienced within these apps using three specific dimensions related to their perceptions of a rejection: passive/active, considerate/inconsiderate, and clear-unambiguous/unclear-ambiguous. These dimensions of rejection are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Passive/Active rejections. The passive/active dimension of MDA rejection emerged throughout the interviews as a way to contextualize the responses of the participants during their sorting of rejections based on perceived similarities and differences. Mobile daters viewed rejections differently depending on if they were passive or active. Passive rejections were ones where the rejector chose not to take any specific
action or put in any effort, such as ghosting, leaving someone on read, or stringing a conversation along with one-word responses. Many mobile daters discussed the prevalence of these passive rejections within MDAs. Specifically, Evie, a 22-year-old Hispanic woman, explained, “I think because of how easy it is to ghost somebody that’s definitely the most common because, you know, you really never have to see these people ever again. There’s no real repercussions of it.” Rejectors were able to use these strategies because there is no perceived downside, leaving rejectees to make sense of the rejection later.

Active rejections were interpreted as those in which the rejector took some sort of specific action that led to the rejection. These were rejections like direct rejection, not providing contact information, or unmatching. Even though unmatching was similar to ghosting (in that there was no more interaction), many participants considered unmatching an active rejection type because someone had to deliberately choose to unmatch within an MDA. Adam, a 24-year-old white man, explained it is hard to imagine that unmatching is not done purposely as it is almost impossible to navigate to the unmatch option and “accidently” remove an interaction. There were some exceptions to the perception of unmatching as active, but those instances were tied to system-based unmatching, such as Bumble unmatching daters if they do not initiate contact with 24 hours. While MDA users preferred the more conversational, direct, and active rejections, they expressed that the most common active rejection type was unmatching through the MDA system.

After determining if a rejection was active or passive, the daters reported reacting differently to these rejections depending on if they were considerate/inconsiderate and/or clear-unambiguous/unclear-ambiguous. Two specific pile sort activities were designed based on the importance of hurt feelings and rejection clarity within previous literature investigating rejection. The pile sort prompts were used to have daters rank their rejections from most to least hurtful and from clearest to most ambiguous.

**Considerate/Inconsiderate rejections.** The rejections cited in the study differed in their perceived emotional impact. Overall, more considerate rejections caused daters to experience fewer “hurt feelings”. This is in line with previous findings that recognizing the need to belong of a person can downplay the hurt feelings, such as feeling unwanted or isolated, that can come from rejection (Leary, 2001; Storm & Storm, 1987). The salience and rankings of rejection strategies based on these rankings is illustrated in Table 5.4
Table 5.4: Ranking of Rejection: Most Hurtful (n= 41)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Resp. %</th>
<th>Avg. Rank</th>
<th>Smith's S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>GHOSTING</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>80.49</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>0.5636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>53.66</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>0.3109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>UNMATCHING</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41.46</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>0.2719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>LEAVING ON READ</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36.59</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>0.2828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>UNRECIPIROCATED SWIPE</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36.59</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>0.1292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>NO RESPONSE</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>34.15</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.1622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>NO SPARK</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>34.15</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>0.1597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>BLOCKING</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.83</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>0.1869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>DIFFERENT GOALS</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.83</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>0.1634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>LEADING ON: IN APP EMOTIONAL GRATIFICATION</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.63</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>0.0862</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar to the overall salience of rejection strategies in Table 5.3, the first three frequently cited types of rejection were also regarded as hurtful. However, leaving someone on read was more salient than no response rejections and often was placed higher in rankings of emotional impact than unmatching. Ghosting in particular had the lowest average rank and was frequently cited as one of the most hurtful rejections. Across the sample, there were few who could not cite a time they experienced ghosting. Moreover, many argued that ghosting happened more in developing relationships where people had invested time and emotional resources into an interaction. Getting to this stage of a conversation made rejectees believe that they should receive some sort of explanation for the end of the interaction, making the lack of explanation feel more hurtful.

Though they hurt in the short term, direct rejections were perceived as better in the long-term because they curtailed the potential emotional spiraling that often accompanies more ambiguous rejection types like ghosting. As Alex, a white 21-year-old man, claimed, “with being like turned down like you kind of like ‘shot your shot’, but you got shot down, you got turned down. So it’s not as bad as like ghosted or like stood up.” Carley, a 21-year-old white woman, echoed these remarks stating, “if you had some sort of explanation then you’d probably feel better about it”. However, as noted in RQ1, there was often a dark side of direct rejection that could be emotionally devastating for daters.

Within conversations that moved beyond initial interactions and into plans to meet in person, mobile daters had higher expectations for receiving a direct rejection. When they encountered these rejections, daters expressed that the sense of hurt feelings was still there but tampered down by an understanding as to why they had been rejected. In his story “giving it a go”, Carl, a 23-year-old white man, described how
he reacted to a direct rejection he found to be considerate after an in-person date with someone he met on Bumble, “What more can you do? But just say, ‘Yeah, I appreciate your time. I had a nice time, but I totally understand that being a deal breaker for you. Just Good luck to you have a nice life.’” In line with previous research on implicit theories, some people with growth-oriented outlooks value having closure in their relationship seeking (Knee, 1998), and the rejections that felt honest and clear to the rejected mobile daters had the smallest emotional impact because of this closure.

While inconsiderate direct rejections were uncommon, they were still the subject of more than a quarter of the episodes of rejection shared during the interviews. Alex illustrates the impact of these rejections through his story “Fuck my Life”:

_We talk and things end up going well, we are meeting up and hooking up, then that kind of like starts in my mind, I thought we were dating…She ends up breaking things off with me. Because she was worried every single time we were going to interact that I was going to tell her I loved her, and that's how she broke up…There was a very high level of like miscommunication, non-communication, between the two of us, we thought we were at different levels with each other, she just like laid it in kind of like very blunt about like why things ended. I started to develop more of emotional interest—I'll say romantic interest—the development of a romantic interest that just kind of got like, stepped on._

Compared to the considerate direct rejections, these more hurtful exchanges seem to place the self-interests of the rejector above the self-esteem of the person being rejected. The deeper impact of inconsiderate rejections was typically felt if there was more of an emotional investment and a longer history of communication, but also occurred when people were negotiating meeting off the app. As Liana, a 24-year-old Latina who had used multiple dating apps over approximately five years, explained:

_I really liked [someone], we'd been talking for a while, like, maybe we can like try talking again sometime. Or, we could hang out more. And like he gave like this shit response of 'I'm not really looking for anything right now'._

These inconsiderate direct rejections seemed different to the mobile daters because they felt like they were not getting the whole story. Even if the rejected dater feels the considerate rejector is not telling the truth in hindsight, the willingness to have a dialogue was interpreted as more honest and understandable.

While these were considered the “gold standard” for what should happen within MDA rejection, many of the stories shared by mobile daters made it clear that such direct, considerate rejection seldom occurs. In that regard, some mobile daters recognized they were part of the problem. Even though they might not always like ghosting, many daters admitted to using it as a rejection because it is often an easier,
or even safer, alternative. Having these previous experiences on the app helped them as they started to cope with rejection.

**Clear-Unambiguous/Unclear-Ambiguous rejection.** When rejections were clear daters were often disappointed; however, they did not feel as hurt. Having ambiguity present in a rejection was related to its perceived emotional impact. Anise, a 19-year-old Iraqi American woman, explained that rejection “is the most hurtful when you don’t know because when you are unsure what the other person’s motivations are you can feel sad and embarrassed when things do not work out”. This is especially relevant if the rejectee perceived the interaction was moving towards a relationship, a point which Anise echoed when she said, “being wrong sucks…and it hurts again when you have to defend your decision to stay in these interactions to your friends”. This uncertainty regarding if rejection had happened led mobile daters to experience confusion and hurt feelings surrounding their standing with the prospective partner. The rankings for this dimension are presented in Table 5.5.

**Table 5.5: Ranking of Rejection: Clearest/Unambiguous (n= 41)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Resp. %</th>
<th>Avg. Rank</th>
<th>Smith’s S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>GHOSTING</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>80.49</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>0.4438</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
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<td>53.66</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.4658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>UNMATCHING</td>
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<td>41.46</td>
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<td>0.3206</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>LEAVING ON READ</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36.59</td>
<td>3.41</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>UNRECIPROCATED SWIPE</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36.59</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.1612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>NO RESPONSE</td>
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<td>34.15</td>
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<td>NO SPARK</td>
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<td>34.15</td>
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<tr>
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<td>BLOCKING</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.83</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>0.1922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>14.63</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>0.0501</td>
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</table>

While Ghosting was the most cited rejection, it was less salient than direct rejections because these strategies differed strongly on their average rank within participants lists of clear rejections. When direct rejection was mentioned, it was often the clearest strategy daters reported. Conversely, passive strategies (like ghosting or leaving someone on read) and motivational differences (like being lead on or having different goals) were much more ambiguous. Rejection was frequently interpreted as being clear by daters if it happened early in the MDA exchange. This is also illustrated within Table 5.5, as unmatching and no response rejections also had low average ranks in this prompt.
Most mobile daters echoed that early instances of non-response were clear. Carl, a 23-year-old white man, shared his initial impressions from sending messages to matches on Tinder, “if you just send your first message and just get completely no response... especially after like a week or so if you get nothing, you probably aren't going to get one.” Even if daters did not know why someone chose not to reply, the act itself was clear. Except for rare occurrences, these rejections did not seem to impact daters, as they explained that there was no real expectation or evidence that the initial interaction would lead to something more.

The perceived clarity of rejections can also help contextualize why some instances of specific rejections were viewed as less hurtful by daters. Liam, a 21-year-old white man, shared how direct rejections that seemed to consider the emotional interests of the rejectee and rejector were easier to understand in the moment. He explained, “when there is no ambiguity with it, and both parties understand what's going on, there's no room for misinterpretation like in ill-thought rejection.” These clear motivations and explanations for why a relationship was not going to develop were important. When explaining how she felt after a direct rejection, Riya, a 24-year-old Asian American woman who mostly used Bumble, explained:

*I don't have to guess why I was rejected. So I don't have to look at myself and be like, What? What was wrong? What did I do wrong? And then this way I know for sure, and I can just move on.*

Having a clear explanation for the rejections helped daters cope and reduce ambiguity, especially compared to more ambiguous acts like ghosting and unmatching. It may be easier for daters to notice these passive rejections have occurred if they have experience in the apps, but mobile daters frequently explained that simply recognizing their occurrence did not help them understanding the motivations of the rejector.

Interestingly, men and women differed in their ranking of rejection strategies. Though not explicitly prompted, unique differences with respect to men’s and women’s experiences of rejection emerged across the considerate/inconsiderate and clear-unambiguous/unclear-ambiguous dimensions. To illustrate the emergence of these differences, I will first focus on how these groups differed in their salience ratings for rejections in general. Then, I will explain how these two dimensions of rejection were experienced differently by men and women within MDAs.
Differences in Rejection Salience Between Men and Women

Throughout the interviews and free listing, differences began to emerge between the way men and women processed and ranked rejections. While the definitions and explanations of what constitutes these rejections, or made them passive/active, were similar between men and women the salience of the rejection types experienced within MDAs differed. Ghosting was still the most salient form of rejection cited, but the first break in salience for men came between ghosting (0.6242) and unmatching (0.4409) whereas the first break for women was between ghosting (0.5974) and direct rejections (0.2980). The location of the second break was different for men and women as well. For men, the salience of the rejections falls off a bit between item 6, unreciprocated swiping (0.2310), and 7, blocking (0.1988). However, for women the citation of rejection strategies is fairly consistent until the second break between perceiving no romantic spark (0.1534) and the feeling of being used for someone else’s emotional gratification (0.1070). Similar to the population mean, both men and women had rejection free lists that contained, on average, five items. A detailed breakdown of these cited rejection for men and women can be found in Tables 5.6 and 5.7. The scree plot visualizations of these salience rankings can be found in Figures 5.2 and 5.3.

### Table 5.6: Top 10 Rejection Shared by Men ($n = 14$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Resp. %</th>
<th>Avg. Rank</th>
<th>Smith's S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>NO RESPONSE</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.3434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>LEAVING ON READ</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35.71</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>0.1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>UNRECIPRICATED SWIPE</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35.71</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>0.2310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
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<td>28.57</td>
<td>2.75</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>DIFFERENT GOALS</td>
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<td>28.57</td>
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<td>0.1226</td>
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<td>0.1510</td>
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</table>
Table 5.7: Top 10 Rejection Shared by Women ($n = 27$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Resp. %</th>
<th>Avg. Rank</th>
<th>Smith's S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>GHOSTING</td>
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<td>81.48</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>0.5974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>55.56</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>0.2980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>UNRECIPIRATED SWIPE</td>
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<td>37.04</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.3194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<td>37.04</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>0.2388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>33.33</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>29.63</td>
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<td>0.1914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>LEADING ON: IN APP EMOTIONAL GRATIFICATION</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.1070</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.2
Scree plot for the precentual of citation of MDA rejection freelist items (men)

Figure 5.3
Scree plot for the percentual of citation of MDA rejection freelist items (women)
**Differences in Considerate/Inconsiderate rejection.** Men and women explained their distinct experiences of considerate/inconsiderate rejection during the free listing portion of the interview. These distinctions can be viewed in Table 5.8 and 5.9. Similar to the overall rankings, ghosting was the most salient, hurtful rejection for both men and women. When discussing their reaction to being ghosted, men and women shared they were more affected by ghosters when they spent time more interacting with them prior to the rejection. However, this stronger emotional response seemed tied less to this particular rejection strategy and more towards these groups’ general utilization of affordances, use of MDAs, and emotional investment. Specifically, daters described feeling more hurt when they leveraged their availability to spend time developing a relationship, perceived the rejector as especially attractive, or were rebuffed in their attempt to move a conversation off MDAs. The differences in interpretation are described further below.

**Table 5.8: Most Hurtful Rejection: Men (n= 14)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Resp. %</th>
<th>Avg. Rank</th>
<th>Smith's S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
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<td>50.00</td>
<td>3.14</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>NO RESPONSE</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42.86</td>
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<td>0.2311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>LEAVING ON READ</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35.71</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.2895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>UNRECIPRICATED SWIPE</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35.71</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>0.0775</td>
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<tr>
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<td>28.57</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>DIFFERENT GOALS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.1292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>NO SPARK</td>
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<td>28.57</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.1837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>NO SHARING OF CONTACT INFORMATION</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.1367</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5.9: Most Hurtful Rejection: Women (n= 27)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Resp. %</th>
<th>Avg. Rank</th>
<th>Smith's S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>GHOSTING</td>
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<td>81.48</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>0.5828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>55.56</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>0.3123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>UNRECIPRICATED SWIPE</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37.04</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>0.1560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>LEAVING ON READ</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37.04</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>0.2793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>NO RESPONSE</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>4.38</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>DIFFERENT GOALS</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>0.1811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
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<td>29.63</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>0.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>UNMATCHING</td>
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<td>29.63</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>0.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>NO SPARK</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29.63</td>
<td>4.67</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>LEADING ON: IN APP EMOTIONAL GRATIFICATION</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.0569</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first break in salience for men was between ghosting (0.5265) and unmatching (0.4070), and the first break for women was between ghosting (0.5828) and direct rejections (0.3123). This difference in ranking may be related to the swipe behaviors of men and women within the initiation and discovery phases of mobile dating. In discussing how they select partners within MDAs, it became clear that men and women take different approaches to finding potential partners to talk to within these apps. Men are more likely to swipe on a large number of available profiles in the hopes of just getting a match in general. If they get a match, they will use the in-app conversations to focus the list of available matched prospects down to promising relational partners. This strategy is described by Adam, a 24-year-old white man: “as a guy, it's usually just more efficient to swipe right on a lot of people on apps like Tinder or Bumble, and if you get accepted to narrow it down later.” This quote is further supported by the rankings of rejection impact. Unreciprocated swipes were least hurtful rejection reported by men, with an average rank of 5.8.

On the other hand, women were often a lot more purposeful in their swiping choices. Evie, a 22-year-old Hispanic woman, explained that “girls are pretty analytical and they are very picky with what they swipe on”. This was echoed by Tonya, a 19-year-old African American woman who was relatively new to Tinder, who argued women often have the “upper hand” on these apps. She feels that because she is specific with her swipes, “there have been very few times that I’ve swapped right on someone and we haven’t matched”. Kanti, 20-year-old Bengali woman, explains how this lack of swipe reciprocity can feel like rejection:

*I think on the female side, if it is not an instant match, you are kind of a little surprised just because you expect a guy already to have swiped. But eventually if after a while it isn’t a match, then it’s seen as rejection cuz that means they probably swapped left.*

Because not receiving an immediate match was surprising, this could make unreciprocated swipe rejection stand out more for women than men. This purposeful swipe strategy may also help explain why other forms of passive rejection, like being left on read, stood out in the minds of female daters. While women swipe on fewer profiles, they are also less likely to share access to their private social media accounts and phone numbers because of concerns surrounding their safety and the authenticity of the prospective partner. Being left on read after feeling confident in a prospective relationship’s trajectory may lead to this rejection feeling more hurtful.
Moreover, women also reported more instances of derogatory comments from their prospective male partners, in line with previous findings on mobile dating behaviors (Anderson, et al., 2020). These messages could occur as the female dater was trying to end an interaction. As Kristie, a 19-year-old white woman, illustrated, "I reject them., and I'm like, 'hey this isn't really working out', and then you get called a bitch or something". While men did report direct instances of rejection, none reported feeling specifically targeted or insulted within a rejection based on their appearance, or felt like the rejectee was trying to target their self-esteem. This distinction may explain why these rejections were ranked by women as more hurtful.

Curiously, even though women were not likely to be rejected by blocking this rejection strategy was ranked by them as the most hurtful when it was included in free lists. Since this prompt asked participants to list any rejection experiences they had experienced, used themselves, or even heard about it is possible that women cited this strategy because they had used it, or knew someone who had. Previous research on rejection has illustrated that while rejectees can feel a sense of hurt after being rejected, rejectors can also experience a sense of guilt if they feel bad about rejecting a prospective partner (Baumesiter, et al., 1993). This empathy for the rejected dater could be related to choosing rejection strategies, specifically in the decision to unmatch or block a prospective partner. While both have similar effects for the rejector, blocking conveys the rejectee will receive additional consequences from the system whereas unmatching only removes a problematic partner from the rejector’s pool of matches.

For men, the second most salient rejection was unmatching. While this form of rejection was not always hurtful because it happened earlier in an MDA interaction, it was frustrating because the deletion of the interaction prevented men from being able to understand why their attempt to develop a relationship had failed. Men also rated a lack of sharing contact information as a form of rejection more often than women. This may have occurred because men are often the dater who initiates and attempts to move the conversation to other apps within heterosexual MDA interactions (Zhang & Yasseri, 2016). These rejections were typically direct refusals, but they could also be combined with passive strategies as Adam, a 24-year-old white man, illustrates in his story:

_I was talking to someone about a month ago, and things went well. We’re talking for like a week… getting to know each other pretty well. I did say, ‘Oh, do you want to go off of Tinder or something?’ And then all of a sudden, I was ghosted. After not having had a response in about 12 hours I realized, Oh, that’s what happens._
While being rebuffed early on elicited more feelings of disappointment or frustration than hurt, moving from initial interactions to off-MDA conversations was an important step for transitioning from matchmaking to in-person dating and signified a deepening of relational investment.

**Differences in Clear-Unambiguous/Unclear-Ambiguous rejection.** Tables 5.10 and 5.11 detail how men and women ranked rejections based on their clarity. While ghosting was listed frequently by both men and women, rankings on other rejections strategies were more varied. For men, unmatching (0.5592) was the second-clearest rejection while direct rejection ranked second for women (0.5069). However, recognizing a rejection as clear may not be something MDA users pick up immediately upon joining an MDA. Paul, a 20-year-old Asian American man, added some context to this issue when describing how he learned to recognize rejection: “rejection is very subtle…I base all of this on her actions, and if I recognize them. You have to learn how to read between the lines, and you have to learn to attribute their actions to their intent.” Experiences and affordances both play a role in understanding if rejection is occurring. In this way, unmatching may be a pretty obvious form of rejection for mobile daters to recognize—but only after they understand how visibility functions in the apps. Otherwise, they may just be confused as to where their conversation went when they return to the app and not recognize that a rejection occurred.

**Table 5.10: Clearest MDA Rejection: Men (n = 14)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Resp. %</th>
<th>Avg. Rank</th>
<th>Smith's S</th>
</tr>
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Table 5.11: Clearest MDA Rejection: Women (n = 27)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Resp. %</th>
<th>Avg. Rank</th>
<th>Smith's S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>81.48</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>0.4524</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>0.5069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>UNRECIPRICATED SWIPE</td>
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<td>37.04</td>
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<td>0.1811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>LEAVING ON READ</td>
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<td>37.04</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>0.2296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.2190</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>BLOCKING</td>
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<td>29.63</td>
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<tr>
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<td>29.63</td>
<td>2.67</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>4.38</td>
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<td>4.50</td>
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</table>

This experience with unmatching may also explain why this strategy was ranked as clearer for men than women. Because women are more likely to encounter negative comments when moving to end an interaction, they may opt for system-mediated rejections, like unmatching or blocking, that reject while simultaneously preventing future contact within the application. Men would then see unmatching rejections more in their use of MDAs, making them likely to notice the rejection strategy occurred. Conversely, women would find being rejected through unmatching as more ambiguous, which is supported by the salience ranking of unmatching by women in the pile sort prompt.

The most ambiguous rejection for men was unreciprocated swipes. Similar to their rankings of hurtful rejections, the swiping strategy of men within MDAs may make them feel less invested in these passive rejections. The frequency of unreciprocated swipes may be confusing and led men to question their understanding of availability within these spaces. Moreover, frustration over extended periods of not receiving many matches also made male daters perceive a large amount of competition in MDA.

Even though women were more likely to use their understanding of visibility to find warranting information within MDA profiles, both men and women had difficulties recognizing, over the course of a conversation, their prospective partner had different motivations. Men and women both considered motivational rejections, such as recognizing the rejector has different relational goals or not feeling a romantic spark, among the most ambiguous rejections. While men did not report many instances of feeling led on in MDA interactions, this ability to “read between the lines” during conversations with potential rejectors was still something that helped them identify rejection. Noticing these rejections required a
combination of application experience and knowledge of affordances. Vihaan, a 25-year-old South Asian man, argued that while some daters do overtly state what they are looking for in their bio, it is typically “very hard to tell on these apps if they don't want anything sexual [because] it's not something that you immediately hop on to. I have to get to know a person a little bit more”. The specific affordances that men and women used to recognize rejections also played a role in their attempts to contextualize and understand why their MDA interactions ended.

Gender and processing: Variations in the use of affordances to contextualize rejection. Of the affordances discussed in this study, availability and visibility were the most connected to both a daters interpretation of a rejection and how they experienced it. Some of the elements of mobile dating that helped users move past a rejection were the number of available alternatives within these networks and the ability to interact with new prospective partners anywhere at any time. Many participants shared how common it was for a dater to be talking to multiple relationship prospects at once. When this is the case, MDAs can be a place where people seek refuge from one rejection by moving ahead with other promising interactions, but men and women differed in their approach to seeking relationship and perceptions of rejection because of their utilization of affordances. Specifically, women used their afforded availability and visibility to prevent instances of hurtful rejection whereas men used their perceptions of visibility to rationalize their lack of success within these spaces.

Female daters’ utilization of visibility and availability for physical and emotional safety. With regard to multiple interactions and alternatives, the interview data made it evident that men and women negotiate their affordances within these interactions differently. Women would often describe steps they take to manage their availability by limiting the notifications they receive from the apps. They would share contact information for other apps, where notification settings were more open, specifically to ensure they could focus their time on promising relationships. However, this step was only taken after they used their afforded visibility to verify profile information on MDAs against other social media profiles and within dating app conversations to feel comfortable letting this prospective partner into their social life. While this moderation strategy helps show the importance of multimodality, it also illustrates the steps women take within MDAs to feel safe during their relational development.
The main motivations for this utilization of visibility and availability are to avoid instances of hurtful rejection that can come from developing relationships too quickly and ensuring safer in-person interactions. As Carley, a 21-year-old white woman, shared, looking up people on social media or asking their personal social network about a potential match was important to make sure she was talking to a safe, honest person within apps. The safety concern was especially present for the women interviewed in the study, who more often than men saw verifying information in a dating profile against other social media as an essential precondition for meeting someone from a dating app in-person. Verifying this information specifically helped avoid rejections from people who were catfishing or using conversations to boost their own sense of self-worth.

Female mobile daters often turned off MDA notifications because they would have too many messages to manage, leading to feeling overwhelmed. Maisy, a 19-year-old Asian American woman, described how she had no trouble picking the apps back up after spending time away working on academic or professional obligations: “I’m a girl, whenever I want to start using the app again it’s not a concern to get matches… the volume is so high, whenever I want to start using it again, it’s not hard.” This sentiment was echoed by other women in the interviews who claimed that finding prospective partners on these apps are often just easier for women. However, women were also the only participants who reported receiving unwanted sexual advances and images during their initial interactions on MDAs. This is not to say that male daters do not experience this kind of harassment as rejection, but that in this sample, such experiences were frequently reported by female dater. These acts felt like rejections, and their impact is illustrated in this response from Kristi, a 19-year-old white woman:

*I mean it would be a pretty graphic. As in … I won’t filter it, but, I would have 10 new messages on Tinder, and I remember one day I looked at it, and the guy just said ‘sit on my face’.*

Responses like these, as well as the derogatory comments discussed previously, influenced the swiping behaviors of women on MDAs, who more often than men used warranting to be selective with their swipes and avoid future rejections.

Another approach women took to avoiding hurtful direct rejections was to preemptively utilize passive rejections that cut off contact with the rejectee. In her interview, Maisy described the rationale for this approach:
I think the thing about ghosting is that, especially with people who you were very unsure about, there's kind of... I'm sure you've seen the text or how the guy will become like really abusive and violent in text after, and so ghosting is also a safety precaution [for girls] because you feel you don't actually know how they'll react when you formally let someone down.

When combined with strategies mitigating availability, like turning off MDA notifications, ghosting someone could be an effective way to avoid future interactions indefinitely while mitigating the impact of hurtful messages. Other non-response strategies like blocking and ghosting, could be used by women as a way to manage visibility, removing their profile from men who may react negatively to direct rejection in order to provide a sense of safety online.

Male dater's perceptions of system-generated rejection. Interestingly, male mobile daters frequently described running out of available people and matches within their use of MDAs. In response, they would move to new applications in a search for alternatives or expand their geographic range within the applications. These different outlooks also impacted how they coped after a rejection. Men also cited that alternatives could be helpful in overcoming rejection, but they often perceived more competition from other male daters, and they typically did not manage their availability by shutting down MDA notifications. Paul, a 20-year-old Asian American man, illustrated this point when discussing challenges to develop relationships within MDAs:

Tinder is like hyper competitive. There's three times as many men as women on that app. When there's like a supply and demand, it's Pareto's principle, top 20% get the 80%. If she doesn't like you, there's like five other dudes willing to like talk to her.

Although previous analysis on the demographic landscape of MDAs does not mesh with this observation, this perceived competition could be disheartening and frustrating to the men on MDAs, and drove many to change, or remove, apps if they were not finding relational success. Carl, a 23-year-old white man, shared that his mental state at the time of a rejection was a big factor in how he responded to it, explaining:

Getting matches and talking to some people, you know, it feels like less urgent and less hurtful, but if you're kind of having a tough time in life, and not having a lot of success in dating apps, and you don't get responses, it feels a lot more like rejection.

The smaller impact of rejection within MDAs was still preferred to face-to-face rejections, but over time experiencing these repeated rejections in an MDA could lead to hurt feelings and negative opinions of the dating applications themselves. Male daters often felt more rejected by the algorithmic matching systems present in MDAs, like swipe settings and profile presentation rates, than female daters. As Mark, a 21-
year-old man, explained: “Tinder obviously doesn't want to give you all of those people at once, otherwise, you wouldn't have a reason to go back on.” These differences in perception of system-generated visibility and rejection impacted how male daters thought about the utility of MDAs and the likelihood of being pressured towards spending money within the application to improve their chances of relational success.

Some men contended the MDAs intentionally limited the number of people who saw their profile to encourage male daters to pay for premium app features. Paul, a 20-year-old Asian American man, described how the search for success in these apps can be challenging: “You notice this with all the apps they have a financial incentive to make you purchase their product. They slow down the incoming match rate. Initially, you get a lot and then after a while, kind of dies down”. These decreasing rates of matches over time were damaging to the self-esteem of men on these apps, and some resorted to using strategies to attempt to manipulate the algorithms to show their profile to more people. Alex, a white 21-year-old man, described an approach his friend took to get around these algorithms:

And there are a couple algorithms, I guess that go on in the backgrounds where the more active you are, the more people that are all out and match you with, or your profile will show up more often. So this is diving a little deeper, but I had one friends that found the source code toward a part who wrote automated programs for it before.

While not every mobile dater had these technical skills, other men described strategies they would use to circumvent their perceived influence of the algorithms, such as deleting applications and user information and reinstalling them with a new profile, or paying for the premium versions of free dating apps. Trying to find ways to manipulate the algorithm to match previous levels of success within dating apps was a way men tried to use these systems in the app to mitigate their perceived rate of rejection.

While this outlook was a useful heuristic for male daters trying to understand the rejection within these MDAs, some men also noted how their use of selection algorithms within the apps could be influencing their perceptions of rejection. Some applications did not have enough users in a geographic area to make mass swiping a sustainable strategy. Eventually, male daters felt like they ran out of people to match with on MDAs, as Liam, a 21-year-old white man, described in his experiences with Bumble, “on Bumble, I know that the base is slightly smaller so if I just go through profiles like they're a dirty sock then I'm gonna be left with nobody else to really match with.” Some thought this reduction might happen because of a dwindling number of women in a geographic area, which was addressed by expanding the geographic range within the apps. However, this expansion could lead to more perceived rejection as many women
reported having geographic ranges smaller than the application default. Other times, switching apps to ones with a larger, or different, user base could help male daters use their affordances to get back into relational conversations.

Moving Forward from MDA Romantic Rejection

Even though these rejections people experienced, whether from other daters or the MDA systems, could elicit many emotional reactions, most daters thought MDA rejections were overall less painful than traditional dating rejection. When sharing a story about a time when she received no response online, Layla, a 20-year-old white woman, shared that while sometimes she felt bad, “it’s usually short term just because there’s not as much going into it as maybe, like, an in-person relationship”. Men shared similar sentiments, with Carl, a 23-year-old white man, explaining, “When you’re on these apps, you’re very detached. You don’t know who’s rejecting you, don’t even know if you’re being rejected, really. It’s not in your face. The worst rejection on an app you could get are people not swiping on you. Compare that to, like, the worst you get in real life.” Even though there could be some powerful emotional responses to rejection experienced within MDAs, the rejections received in the apps themselves were comparatively inconsequential to those experienced daters reported experiencing offline. As such, the detached, impersonal nature of rejection within MDAs could actually be an advantage for mobile daters.

Notably, such responses may only apply to interaction exchanges that have not developed beyond a certain time frame, a strong emotional investment, or greater perceived value. In looking at how daters defined rejection, there is a distinction between rejections experienced early on in MDA interactions and those that occur after a more established rapport between daters. For example, the way daters experienced being ghosted by another dater later on in their interaction exchange elicited different emotions than simply not getting a response to an initial message or greeting. Processing strategies helped MDA users after they were rejected by someone they felt a connection with, and these strategies were different depending on the type of rejection experienced, the perceived value of the prospective partner or investment in the budding relationship, and the gender of the rejected dater. These differences in interpretation and rejection response raise critical implications that will be discussed further in the discussion section.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Overview of Findings

Throughout this study, I have identified how the perceived affordances, predicted outcome values, and implicit theories of mobile daters play a role in their understanding of romantic rejection. The combination of interviews, rejection episodes, and free list data from this study has allowed for further exploration on two research questions: *what are the types of rejection experienced by daters within MDAs?* (RQ1) and *how do MDA users experience rejection within dating applications?* (RQ2). In this section, I will explain some of the key findings of this project before examining its conceptual, methodological, and theoretical contributions.

MDA users reported multiple forms of rejection. The most salient, in line with previous research on mobile dating rejection (Freedman, et al., 2018; LeFebvre, et al., 2019), was ghosting. Similar no-response rejections unmatching, leaving on read, and not responding were also frequently cited by the interviewees. The nuances between these different types of rejections were explained by the mobile daters through their shared experiences. More experienced mobile daters provided many different types and examples of rejection, but the average number of cited rejection types across the sample was five.

When explaining the various types of rejections they experienced, clear dimensions of rejection began to emerge throughout the participants’ interviews. These were expanded into a typology of MDA rejection, which was then used as a guide to interpret various rejection episodes, by comparing how daters responded to rejection types depending on the degree to which it was passive or active, considerate or inconsiderate, and clear or ambiguous. Rejections were often classified and interpreted along multiple dimensions at once. For example, ghosting was sometimes considered a passive, inconsiderate, and ambiguous rejection by the interviewees. These dimensional classifications among different kinds of rejections were important for participants as they shared the processes they used to move on from each type.

Using these dimensions as a guide, it emerged throughout the free listing activities and shared episodes of rejection that while men and women had similar understandings of what they considered active and passive, there was some differentiation in their rankings of hurtful and clear rejections. Ghosting and direct rejections were among the most frequently mentioned hurtful rejections between both groups of daters, but men reported unmatching as more hurtful than women. Comparatively, women ranked...
unreciprocated swiping as more hurtful than men. These ratings fit previous observations on gendered expectations of interaction patterns within MDAs illustrating how men are more likely to initiate interactions (Zhang & Yasseri, 2016).

The sex-based differences in the rejection experiences reported here may be tied to the different ways in which men and women approach finding a potential partner in these applications. The swiping patterns that men and women reported within these apps were often different, and the differences in selection of potential conversation partners led to different interpretations of rejection. Men shared that they often swiped widely and frequently and only later focused their prospects down through matches and interaction exchanges. While this approach could lead to a lot of passive, no response rejections, men often did not put much stock into these initial refusals. However, repeated instances of rejection could lead to changes in how they approached future use of MDAs. In contrast, women were more selective with their “right swipes” because they perceived a higher likelihood of receiving matches. They were often more surprised when they did not immediately receive a match after swiping, and their understanding of visibility within the app was challenged through these experiences of rejection.

Male daters were more likely to talk about the algorithms present within MDAs, especially after reflecting on their visibility within applications and response to rejections. Specifically, men contended that the algorithms within the apps created even greater competition for potential matches. Some took steps to try and manipulate these systems, utilizing their perceived understanding of the apps’ display and matching algorithms to generate swipes on their profiles. While both men and women talked about the sense of competition present within MDAs, both agreed that the population of users within MDAs seemed to skew male. For men, this competition over potential matches led daters to perceive that, over time, the systems within the app were working against them. Male daters reported running out of people to swipe on in their area and being encouraged to purchase features within MDAs to improve their visibility. In response, some men tried to find ways around these systems by taking advantage of their perceived locatability to expand their range of available daters, using multimodality to switch between multiple dating apps within their mobile device, improving visibility by paying for features within a specific app, or simply leaving the application(s) out of frustration.
Conversely, women within MDAs found the high number of potential matches within these apps to be a problem, and as a result they had to strategically adjust their availability within these spaces. When conversations with a match moved off the apps (i.e., on to social media or text message exchanges), a dater’s understanding of multimodality led them to perceive this act as a sign of deepening development. Women did not always extend their strategies for managing availability, such as turning off MDA notifications, to other apps on their device, like Instagram, Snapchat, or SMS messaging. When movement to new apps occurred, so too did left on read rejections. Women were more likely to cite receiving left on read rejections in this study, and this may have occurred because they were more invested in off-app conversations. These rejections could be more memorable than in-app ones because they are more likely to be noticed. Women are more available and emotionally invested in off-app conversations, and this change could be a double-edged sword as the dater can now notice interaction patterns, like time between message notifications, that were not present in their MDA conversation.

The number of available alternatives was also a useful heuristic when comparing how MDA users processed and responded to rejection emotionally. While there were some forms of rejection that elicited more of a sense of hurt feelings than others, being able to move on to the next promising alternative helped mitigate some of the negative emotions involved in specific instances of rejection. This is similar to previous research that describes how people move on from rejection when they hold strong destiny implicit theories of romantic relationships, and encounter an attractive alternative (Franiuk, et al., 2002). However, the overall perceived value of the next potential match mattered less than the basic prospect of having another person to talk to. Moreover, this approach to responding to rejection was reported more often by women than men because of their increased likelihood to have awaiting matches to communicate with in MDAs.

The type of rejection experienced within a particular episode played a role in how it emotionally impacted daters. Perceptions that a rejection was clear and considerate were associated more with direct forms of rejection, and both men and women appreciated when their others rejected them by giving them a specific explanation for why the relationship would no longer continue to develop. However, while direct rejection was the second most salient rejection type mentioned in this study, participants reported that these rejections were not all that common. This lack of perceived frequency of direct rejection may be tied to findings from previous research on the development of online dating. Collins and Gillath (2012) (in
extending Baxter’s research on relationship termination strategies) found that the presence of dating interactions in mediated channels led to the development of mediated dissolution strategies that used specific technological features found within these spaces. Carrying this through to the present study, even though rejected daters thought direct, considerate rejections should occur more often within MDAs, they believed the affordances within the MDA systems made it very easy to avoid directly rejecting someone. Furthermore, rejectees typically understood there was no expectation to receive direct rejections in the early stages of interactions within MDAs.

However, clear rejections were not always considerate to the feelings of rejectees. In line with previous findings on MDAs (Vogel, 2020), the women interviewed in this study experienced more instances of problematic harassment in their online interactions. Some were harassed after articulating they were not interested in pursuing a relationship, sent sexually explicit messages and images without their consent, and called offensive names throughout their times within these applications. Safety within these applications was more important to women respondents, but the issues surrounding online dating harassment has been well documented in previous research surrounding MDAs more generally (Albury, Burgess, Light, Race, & Wilken, 2017). Avoiding these instances of online dating harassment influenced some of the rejection strategies women used within MDAs, like blocking and ghosting, to avoid encountering abuse. Digital dating violence is a common occurrence in mediated dating, and it can often lead to harmful emotional consequences for young women, such as feeling scared, threatened, or embarrassed (Reed, Tolman, & Ward, 2016). While the women in this study shared how they utilized affordances to adapt to these negative interactions, more investigation is needed to understand how these rejection experiences relate to the use of MDAs over time.

Ghosting and unmatching were often clearer forms of received rejection for experienced daters who, through their repeated use of affordances, had been able to recognize when these forms of rejection are happening. Even though they recognized these rejections were occurring, they reported more hurt feelings from these kinds of rejections than more direct, considerate approaches. Observations connected to perceiving the affordances within MDAs, like evaluating differences in communication patterns and understanding why a previous conversation had deleted itself from an MDA, distinguished experienced mobile daters from novices, who tended to report more confusion and ambiguity after experiencing no-
response kinds of rejections. Even though previous research has used the implicit theories framework to help explain responses to MDA rejection (Freedman, et al., 2018), experiencing and interpreting rejection through the lens of previous experiences within MDAs and longer-term MDA use seemed to play a larger role in how daters in this study moved beyond their failed relationship attempts.

Overall, one factor that seemed to play the largest role in how MDA users interpreted and perceived rejection was time. In line with POV theory, spending more time in an interaction lead to the rejectee developing a higher perceived value of that developing relationship (Sunnafrank, 1986). This hope for success in turn lead to a stronger sense of hurt feelings regardless of the type of rejection they ended up encountering. When an interaction had enough emotional investment to move from the matchmaking phase to the discovery phase, rejectees interpreted behavior through their understanding of affordances like increased multimodality (communicating through multiple channels) and availability (spending more time in the interaction) as markers of relationship success. However, as they continued to use dating applications, they were able to identify subtle communication patterns that warned them of rejection.

Instead of time spent interacting, the amount of time between messages was reported by MDA rejectees as a signal that the prospective partner was planning on ghosting. While the ambiguous motives behind ghosting frustrated daters, using these apps for a period of time sensitized them to the norms of interaction and helped them identify when ghosting occurred. Recognizing the rejection gave them the ability to then rationalize their own explanations for why the rejection occurred. In this way, the ambiguity of the rejection worked towards the advantage of the rejectee, potentially minimizing the sensation of hurt feelings from rejection. In their mind, they might not be “ghosted”, this lapse in interaction could mean the potential conversation is open until the prospective partner has time to return for the next message. In this next section, I will go into further detail about how these findings can lead to important theoretical, methodological, and practical implications.

**Contributions**

*Theoretical implications.* While there were some indications of destiny and growth implicit theories present within the population of MDA users interviewed in this study, implicit theories did not appear to play a large role in how daters interpreted, or moved on from, rejection. Instead, the responses from the rejectees illustrate that it was their experiences within the app that played a role in shaping their
responses to rejection. This influence of MDA experience on rejection perceptions is echoed in the implicit theory framework as one of the mechanisms that can lead to the creation of implicit theories (Dweck, et al., 1995). Although experience within the apps, predicted outcomes, and rejection type were more closely related to how daters formed their perceptions of a rejection, this finding may illustrate that growth and destiny mindsets play more of a role in rejection interpretation among daters who are newer to MDAs. As they spend more time within the applications, daters may change their implicit theories, or develop new ones, in response to the specific mechanics of rejection in the mobile dating environment. This application of newly formed implicit theories could help them understand how relationships are “likely” to progress in a mediated space. Theories based on the behavior of various conversation partners, an understanding of affordances, and knowledge of social norms in an MDA platform may be more applicable heuristics developed in response to mobile dating rejection and success.

The stories shared by participants support two previous findings on rejection. First, even though these rejections are “not as big of a deal” as face-to-face rejection, they can still cause a sensation of hurt feelings (Leary & Springer, 2001; Richman & Leary, 2009). When encountering rejections within MDAs, the rejectees shared that some rejections could lead to feelings of disappointment, sadness, anger, and frustration. While many daters who had used the applications for more than a year shared how they became more resilient to rejections over time because of their frequency, there were still certain types of rejection, and contexts, of MDA rejection that could elicit these negative emotional feelings. For example, having a non-response rejection early in an interaction was mundane, but being ghosted after talking to another person for a month was not. Even though these mediated interactions may not always lead to in-person interactions, these findings indicate that even smaller rejections that occur within dating apps can still elicit hurt feelings.

Also, in line with previous research on rejection within more developed romantic relationships and MDAs, the participants in this study expressed that direct rejections were uncommon (Baxter, 1984; Collins & Gillath, 2012; LeFebvre, et al., 2019). Similar to LeFebvre, et al. (2019), many of the rejections people experienced were passive rejections. Ghosting was the most prominent, with a majority of the daters citing this strategy as something they have encountered in their own MDA use. However, while people
encountered many passive rejections within mobile dating, they did not consider all of these rejections to fit the definition of ghosting.

The episodes, types, and examples shared by rejectees in this study illustrate that there are more nuances within mobile dating rejection than are present in previous theoretical definitions. This project extends previous work on rejection through the development of a taxonomy of dating rejection that was drawn from the experiences of the mobile daters interviewed in this project. Building on existing definitions of MDA rejection and situating them within the phases of mobile dating (Markowitz, et al., 2018) led to a stronger conceptualization of romantic rejection. This new lens can serve as a tool for future researchers to differentiate similar, but separate forms of rejection strategies. For example, ghosting can be viewed as something that daters perceived occurring after there was a stronger rapport between the rejectee and the rejector, or after initial interactions within the discovery phase. Conversely, although no response rejections were similar to ghosting in how they are performed, daters often think of them differently in terms of impact and occurrence.

While these kinds of rejections are similar to previous definitions of ghosting in that they are both characterized by a unilateral decision to halt conversations (LeFebvre, 2017b), they differed in the level of hurt feelings they elicited from rejectees. Rejected daters considered no response rejections to be an unavoidable aspect of mobile dating. They did not usually need or want an explanation for no response rejections that occurred in early conversations because they did not view the interaction as a “relationship” yet. However, many mobile daters thought ghosting was more hurtful because, even if a relationship did not progress further beyond this phase, they still contended that they were deserving of an explanation as to why the rejection happened. This distinction related directly to when rejection occurred and led to different emotional valuations for similar ejections. This interaction between hurt feelings, rejection clarity, and rejection type illustrates the importance of looking at rejections based not just on how they are defined, but also where they fall on multiple dimensions such as time, investment, and emotional impact.

To provide conceptual distinction between rejections that occurred in during initial MDA interactions and those that occur in developed romantic relationships, I propose the term *micro-rejection*. A *romantic micro-rejection* is conceptualized as a *lack of relationship initiation, lack of romantic escalation, or a declaration by an individual that they no longer want to interact with the rejectee*. Micro-rejections in MDAs
can be passive (i.e., non-mutual signaling of interest or swipe left; no response to messages, etc.), as well as more direct in nature (i.e., text messages that communicate a desire to end an ongoing introductory SMS conversation) and occur at varying stages of the MDA’s initial development process (i.e., an “unrequited” match, no response to a first contact message, or “ghosting” after series of exchanged messages).

The concept of a micro-rejection allows for a stronger contextual interpretation of MDA rejection based on the amount of time and investment surrounding the emergence of a new relationship. These rejections occur early in romantic relationship development, before the potential relationship intensifies into more serious bonds or stages. These kinds of rejections during the early development of a potential relationships were regarded as less impactful for receivers than being rejected after a longer-term relationship, and the nature of these applications ensures rejection can occur frequently. Across the interviews, participants shared that being rejected within these “relationships” could elicit hurt feelings, but those feelings were not as strong as their in-person rejections. There were some daters who were thankful these rejections had a lower emotional impact, claiming that mobile dating was “lower stakes” compared to face-to-face initiation. Others thought receiving rejection through applications was better for their self-concept, as people in their age groups “are not good at handling direct rejections”. Even when engaged in multiple conversations at once, these mobile daters only reported a strong feeling of hurt when certain conditions were met, such as talking for an extended length of time or after meeting in-person.

The dimensions of rejection identified within this study also provide future researchers with a path to utilizing the micro-rejection construct to differentiate similar types of rejections by their emotional impact. Within this study, ghosting was grouped with unmatching and blocking as similar forms of ambiguous rejection. While all these rejection types were unilateral approaches that cut off interaction between daters, they are interpreted differently by rejectees because of when and how they occurred within the dating application and the relationship’s developmental trajectory. The absence of the interaction within the MDA interface sends a message, and these strategies of rejection differed in their emotional impact. Participants expressed that being ghosted felt different than being unmatched or blocked because the ambiguity present within ghosting allowed them to create an explanation as to why their partner stopped talking to them. In this way, the ambiguity allowed them to rationalize ghosting—for example, contending their conversation
partner “just got too busy” to continue an interaction. Through their utilization of affordances, mobile daters contextualized rejections to mitigate their sense of hurt feelings.

The micro-rejection construct also helps illustrate the conceptual differences between similar forms of MDA rejection. While the motivation behind being ghosted, blocked, or unmatched was perceived as ambiguous for rejectees, the acts of rejection were still considered “clear” in that each one sufficiently ended the interaction. However, an individual’s interpretation of these rejections through their understanding of MDA affordances allowed them to define these rejections as distinct acts with unique effects.

Being unmatched or blocked caused the conversation to be deleted from the rejectee’s application interface. Rejectees who were removed by a person they were interested in were often hurt and confused by someone who used this strategy, but this outcome only occurred if they were invested and knew enough about the apps to recognize the conversation was purposefully removed in the application. Through their understanding of the visibility affordance and the systems within MDAs, people who were rejected through blocking and unmatching knew that the only way the conversation can be removed in this way is if the rejector navigates through the application settings and chooses to deliberately remove the interaction. In this way, the deletion, or disappearance, of the interaction led to different interpretations of the rejection. While ghosted daters could use ambiguity to their advantage (i.e., to protect their own ego), recognizing unmatching or blocking as deliberate created a different sensation of hurt feelings. This difference in interpretation illustrates how the concept of unilateral rejections should be reconceptualized to cover a broader understanding of mobile dating rejection strategies.

Feeling like MDA rejections were “smaller” than face-to-face rejections did help keep daters present on the apps, with many rejectees clarifying that the availability of other daters on these applications and low barrier to start conversations helped them ignore previous rejection episodes. However, the ability to ignore past MDA rejection episodes worked better for people who had additional alternatives to return to after they were rejected. Daters who had experienced frequent micro-rejections and were not presented with additional alternatives reported feeling a stronger sense of overall rejection, became dissatisfied with the utility of MDAs, and had different behavioral responses. Some took some time away from mobile dating (Brubaker, et al., 2016) while others removed the apps from their mobile devices altogether. Even though there are some benefits to experiencing rejection on MDAs (as opposed to in-person rejections), the
sensation of hurt and frustration connected to mobile micro-rejection is still present. More research is
needed to situate the experience of micro-rejection in relation to rejections that occur in established
relationships to better understand how these “low-stakes” rejections lead to a change in a mobile dater’s
perceived utility of an MDA and how they move on from these rejections to develop new strategies for future
relationship formation.

Previous research on POV has illustrated that people make assessments about the value of their
conversation partners during interactions (Sunnafrank, 1986). These valuations help individuals decide
whether they wish to pursue conversations further and illustrate how viewing a person as rewarding is a
strong motivator for relationship development. Previous research on this theory has focused on face-to-
face interactions; however, this tenet of the theory was supported within this study of mobile daters as well.
MDA users would frequently make valuations of their prospective partners during and after exchanging
mobile messages. During matchmaking, MDA users would “swipe right” on the profiles they believed had
the highest prospective partner value. This valuation was often based on the attractiveness of the person
and a perceived overlap of mutual relational goals or interests, similar to previous research on the
assessment of POV assessments made during in-person relationship initiation (Sunnafrank, 1986).

When explaining their decision making within MDA conversations, daters shared that conversations
also felt like an investment. They were willing to put a lot of their emotional resources and time into
conversations with prospective partners that they evaluated as being highly valuable, or were more likely
to develop into long-term relationships. This is also in line with the foundations of POV, as outcome value
forecasts have been previously found to drive behaviors in the early stages of a relationship (Sunnafrank,
1988). When these developing relationships ended in rejection, daters felt more hurt feelings than
interactions that ended earlier in MDA exchanges. Overall, the POV framework helped provide a theoretical
lens to explain the initial decision making of mobile daters and factors contextualizing variations in the
impact of micro-rejections. This study also extends POV beyond face-to-face interactions and into mobile
communication. Future research should investigate the various factors that go into creating a predicted
outcome value within an MDA as the amount of information, as well as the quality of the information, can
vary greatly between applications and individual profiles and potential partners.
Methodological contributions. Qualitative research is a great tool for developing stronger understandings of specific phenomena. While this project has helped support some of what we already understood about mobile dating rejection, it also shows that there are many nuances to how individual daters understand rejection in these spaces. By using multiple qualitative approaches, I was able to gain insights by exploring contradictions between what the participants discussed in their interviews and how they ranked problematic forms of rejection in the pile sort activities. Following these threads helped me to understand that while direct rejections are not necessarily common or frequent within MDAs, they occupy a position of importance in the minds of rejected daters. Stories describing how considerate, direct rejections were in comparison to passive, indirect rejections serve as a specific example of the benefit of triangulation within qualitative analysis. The contextual meaning of a rejection is clearer when it is viewed through multiple lenses.

This project also highlights the advantages of combining theoretical frameworks previously applied within quantitative research through phenomenological approaches. The double hermeneutic within this approach allowed me to balance empirical frameworks with observations to better contextualize and understand the lived experience of individuals. Viewing POV theory, the affordance framework, and the concept of implicit theories through participants’ experiences of rejection illustrates how these paradigms can be applied to new contexts. Stories shared by participants helped to illustrate the process a dater goes through to assign an initial “outcome value” for a prospective partner as well as how they felt after recognizing they had been rejected.

Practical considerations. Practically, this project has also illustrated the role technological affordances play within the interpretation of MDA rejections. Availability and responsiveness were used as indications that a relationship was either developing well or heading towards rejection. Multimodality was a strong indicator of relationship progression versus rejection, with participants sharing that a lack of movement off dating applications (and on to other channels) was a clear sign of rejection. Locatability and visibility were also used to help process rejection. Daters understood that expanding their geographic dating area through the app could lead to more instances of rejection as well as more potential partners. Moreover, rejectees could try to explain away instances of passive rejection, like ghosting or unreciprocated swipes, by interpreting that people might not be seeing their profile or messages. However, their understanding of
the availability affordance led them to believe this was unlikely, as many people who use these apps could easily access them through their mobile devices (Ling, 2004).

Furthermore, “blaming the system”—perhaps for lack of profile visibility or lack of match displays—also underscores ways in which practical use of technology itself can affect perceptions of rejection in MDAs. The ways in which MDAs’ algorithms might nudge partner selection and interaction initiation may also be tied to various experiences of rejection, especially among more seasoned mobile daters. Future work might also examine other practical questions involving data privacy and perceived safety in MDAs. As more elements of society, such as dating behaviors, are turned into data the ethics surrounding how this information is used by corporations warrants closer scrutiny (Albury, et al., 2017). Data is collected from an MDA user the moment they sign up for the service, any time they use the app, and (depending on application permissions) from other always-on aspects of their mobile device. This often includes not just geo-location information, but also the users cell phone contact list, social media history, and a record of every interaction they have had in these spaces (Albury, et al., 2017). While this data is sometimes used to make positive changes in MDAs, like redesigning systems to better fit the needs of a user base, it is more likely that this data will be used primarily for target behavioral advertising. Critically, this data is difficult for MDA users to view or access, and completely outside of their control (Albury, et al., 2017). While some smartphone developers have started to limit the amount of device data available to applications without end-user consent, future research is needed to evaluate how privacy concerns and the commoditization of data impact mobile daters.

Limitations

As MDAs have continued to grow in popularity, more MDAs have been developed for individuals with varying dating preferences and relational goals. Rejections may be interpreted differently depending on the affordances and systems present within each MDA. While I aimed to recruit a sample of participants with a diverse range of rejection experiences, backgrounds, and experience using various kinds of MDAs, there were limitations. Sexuality and race of daters are pertinent issues that deserve additional study; however, in this project the sampling criteria was not tailored to find participants of a specific background and questions were not designed to elaborate on these themes.
First, in order to create a more uniform description of rejection throughout the sample, only heterosexual daters' experiences of rejection were investigated. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual date seekers were not included in the recruitment process. Previous research on MDAs has focused on the use of these applications by homosexual daters (e.g., Corriero & Tong, 2016; Gudelunas, 2012; Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016; Wang & Pachankis, 2016). These individuals were early adopters of online and mobile dating technology; indeed, 70% of same-sex couples claim to have met through MDAs and online sites (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). The use of dating technology may not be as novel among homosexual daters, and—as the process of evaluating and rejecting potential partners may rely on a more experienced understanding of MDA affordances and rejection—their interpretations may differ from what was uncovered here. In other words, because LGBTQ daters are often more likely to use these applications to find dates, they would also have greater experience using these platforms. With that experiences comes a greater, or more varied, frame of reference to interpret and understand micro-rejections. Additionally, these individuals may be dating on these applications but could be siloed within different subnetworks and MDAs. Many MDAs allow for filtering daters based on sexual orientation. Therefore, this cultural group may have their own perspectives on rejection within their dating communities that warrant a more nuanced and specific investigation. This may be especially true, given the unexpected gendered patterns of selection, interaction, and rejection that arose among heterosexual daters in the current sample.

Additionally, while a diverse array of participants was sought, the various experiences of rejection by daters of varying racial groups was not a primary focus of the research project. Previous research has illustrated white online and mobile daters are least open to dating outside their race (Robnett & Feliciano, 2011). Moreover, Asians and Latino daters have patterns of racial exclusion of potential partners, similar to those of whites (Robnett & Feliciano, 2011). Furthermore, this racial exclusion is often gendered: Asian men and Black women are more excluded than their opposite-sex counterparts (Robnett & Feliciano, 2011). In this study, some participants who were people of color reported using specific niche apps, like Dil Mil, that were marketed more towards specific races and ethnicities. However, they did not indicate whether this decision was based on a perceived sense of exclusion within more mainstream dating apps that had a majority white user base. Future research should investigate the motivations behind adoption of these
community-bounded, niche dating applications, as well as the reaction within those spaces to new users who are not members of that apps target social identity group.

With regard to race, cross-race relationship initiation requires one of the daters to be willing to make the first move. White people are often in the “gatekeeper” position for this kind of inclusion/exclusion, but they may not be aware of their racial biases when rejecting other daters (Mendelsohn, Taylor, Fiore, & Cheshire, 2014). While there were some white daters in this study who recognized MDAs allowed them opportunities to date outside their race, the impact of racial preferences on rejection was not mentioned as a real, or perceived, factor within this study. When race was brought up by the participants, it was often female mobile daters reacting to perceived racial preferences, or fetishes, they saw during their MDA interactions with other men. These revelations would lead them to reject those daters. However, implicit biases may play as large of a role as a motivation for rejection as it does a way to process why rejection occurred, and future studies should investigate the impact of race as it pertains to both areas of rejection.

Finally, one factor mentioned during interviews that did likely impact the study was the global COVID-19 pandemic. Participants frequently cited that fear of the virus, local shelter in place orders, and the general uncertainty of the crisis influenced their dating application behavior. Recruitment for this project began in May of 2020 and ended at the end of that summer. During that time, people engaged in differing forms of dating (i.e., Zoom and Facetime dates replaces initial coffee dates; people were often unable to go out to eat at restaurants; bars were closed), and matched daters talked about what they could do “after the pandemic was over”.

However, even though in-person dating was a rarer occurrence, the participants in this study argued that MDAs were still being used during the pandemic. Conversations within them provided a link to the outside world. According to many daters, specific design features were opened up within the apps. People could set their “location” to a destination anywhere around the world, and daters were able to communicate directly with other people impacted by the virus. The participants interviewed in this study reported feeling that more people were on these apps than ever, and their observations are backed up with articles from the popular press. Match Group, the parent company of Tinder and Hinge, saw an increase in users and memberships during the second quarter of 2020 (Meisenzahl, 2020). More research is needed to see if the impacts of the pandemic, such as feelings of social isolation during lockdowns, impacted the
general feelings of rejectees regarding the rejections they experienced and the utility of dating apps. However, this unique utilization of the affordances within dating applications to reach out to other, isolated daters also provides an opportunity for future researchers to investigate the supportive coping that may have been occurring in MDAs at the height of the pandemic.

**Future Research**

While this project shed some light on how mobile daters process and understand micro-rejection, there are additional areas that warrant investigation to better contextualize the rejections present on MDAs. First, future projects should examine the salience of different forms of micro-rejection across different MDAs. The prevalence, emotional impact, and clarity of these rejections may change depending on the application they occur on. The walkthrough method can be especially helpful here. As participants list and rank their rejections, they can share which features within an application lead to them perceiving the same rejection differently across these systems. These insights would help researchers gain a better understanding of how the affordances present through the design of applications can lead to different user experiences, potentially illustrating how the design and development of dating applications can be a factor in mitigating more hurtful forms of micro-rejection.

Moreover, although this study provides a starting point for the development of a taxonomy of mobile dating rejection additional research should move towards grounding the prevalence of these acts within MDAs. By extending the explanations of micro-rejection and the categories for MDA rejection presented in this project, future studies can develop surveys to assess the perceptions and emotional impact of these rejections across MDA users. This sample of daters provided rich descriptions of how they experienced rejections, and further exploration can help illuminate what factors lead to these rejections being experienced differently within applications.

Second, future studies should identify how daters assess predicted values through their utilization of affordances, perceptions, and previous experiences. POV was found to be a useful framework to understand how rejections from highly valued rejectors could cause hurt feelings to develop, but there have been few studies that have previously applied this theory to mobile dating. Additional research can help identify if the process of forming these initial value forecasts of a prospective relationship partner is similar in mediated conversations to how they are formed in face-to-face interactions. Similar to in-person
interactions, these valuations may change over time (Sunnafrank, 2015), and this change may influence how MDA users are impacted by micro-rejections.

This assessment of outcome values may also be related to an individual’s available relational scripts and experiences. This study’s sample was drawn from a generational cohort defined in previous literature as emerging adults. Emerging adults are individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 who have left childhood and adolescence but have yet to receive the enduring responsibilities of adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Bravo, Connolly, & McIsaac, 2017). At this developmental stage, emerging adults are still forming their identities and exploring their options for romantic relationships (Morgan, 2012). As emerging adults explore romantic relationships, they often have fewer relational scripts and less structured relationships (Stanley et al., 2011).

Emerging adulthood is a time when norms and expectations about relationships are forming (Arnett, 2000). The relationships that they do develop are often less stable and prone to turbulence (Fincham & Cui, 2011), and as a result, emerging adults frequently experience romantic rejection (Knox, Zusman, & Nieves, 1998). Importantly, the way emerging adults construct stories about life events is reflexive of their identity and sensemaking (McLean & Pratt, 2006). More exploration is needed to better understand if these experiences of mobile dating micro-rejection are unique to emerging adults or if the conceptualization and understanding of rejection differs across different age-cohorts of mobile daters.

Finally, exploring these differences in rejection perceptions is needed to better understand the interaction between implicit theories and MDAs. Previous research has argued that responses to ghosting can change depending on the implicit theory of the rejectee (Freedman, et al., 2018). While these participants did not seem to be as beholden to growth or destiny frameworks, it may be because their frequent use of MDAs led to the formation of new implicit theories that helped them better understand this dating environment. The stories shared by participants illustrated that daters often define a rejection strategy similarly, but can be affected by it differently. Mental frameworks brought into their mobile dating experience may play a role in creating this distinction. Additional investigations can help contextualize which theories are in use among MDA daters and evaluate how they help them process different forms of micro-rejection.
Conclusion

Rejection is an inevitable consequence of relationship development, but the way rejection is experienced can change depending on where and how it occurs. This study has illustrated that the instances of relationship dissolution that occur within mobile dating applications constitute micro-rejections. These rejections may differ in their level of clarity, emotional impact, and directness, but those rejected by them consider these strategies to be less hurtful than rejections associated with in-person dating. The affordances within mobile communication allow for both the creation of new rejection types as well as an opportunity for rejectees to reframe their understanding of rejection. Affordances helped mobile daters recognize when rejection happened or change their interpretations of what rejection meant.

Just as MDAs have made it easier to find dates, they have also made it easier to reject. While the increased frequency of rejections can make mobile dating frustrating, it also helps daters avoid feeling like they wasted time with someone who was never really interested in them. Of the micro-rejections that were shared by the rejectees in this study, the ones that hurt the most were because the dater felt they had invested a lot of time and emotional energy into their interaction. Interacting for weeks with a potential partner only to have them leave abruptly, without providing a reason why, caused rejectees to feel hurt, but often not hurt enough to leave mobile dating altogether.

The utilization of MDAs, however, points us towards important sociocultural implications surrounding the perceptions and uses of mobile communication affordances broadly, and the experience of rejection specifically. Engaging in relational communication through a mobile device ensures the same technologies that foster dating and sex are connected to other aspects of a dater's life at all times. Rejections could be experienced anywhere, and, depending on one’s understanding of affordances, users must continue to negotiate tensions between using these devices and exposing themselves to hurt feelings, safety threats, and the feeling that they have little control over their data in these spaces. As MDA developers continue to use algorithms to drive daters into interactions, we should also start to question if these systems are doing enough to prevent the most impactful micro-rejections from occurring in these spaces. Many daters argued that if not for the affordances provided through these apps, the ease and lack of consequences surrounding rejections like ghosting and derogatory comments would not be possible.
This study did not directly evaluate the culture within dating apps globally, or each specific MDA platform that daters reported using, but it was clear from the experiences of participants that the overall goal of many was to build lasting romantic relationships with the assistance of these tools. Experiencing micro-rejections may obstruct that goal temporarily, but the convenience and availability of online dating allowed people to quickly move on to the next promising match. As the landscape of available applications in mobile dating continues to change, more people are adopting these methods as part of their relationship seeking strategies. This project has helped to illustrate how rejection occurs within MDAs and explain why users ascribe certain emotions and interpretations to these behaviors. As this research agenda moves forward, more emphasis should be placed on uncovering MDA culture to assist users, developers, and policy makers in better understanding the role these spaces play in relationship health, safety, and emotional well-being. By having users share their experiences, we can work with them to learn how the design of these applications is impacting the micro-rejections within them.
APPENDIX

PRE-INTERVIEW PHONE SCRIPT

Subject ID Number:

Thank you for expressing interest in this study. The goal of this project is to better understand how individuals define and process instances of rejection during their use of mobile dating applications. First, I would like to learn a little more about you to ensure you are eligible to participate in this study. These questions will be brief.

1. How old are you?
2. Do you use mobile dating application?
3. How long have you used mobile dating applications?
4. What is your sexual orientation?
5. What dating applications do you currently use?
6. How well do you understand the features within your dating apps?
   - Pretty well
   - Sort-of well
   - Not very well
7. How often do you use dating apps to seek relationships?
   - Primary form of dating
   - Sometimes used for dating
   - Not used for dating at all

If they meet inclusion criteria: Thank you for answering these brief questions, is there a date and time that would work best for your interview? Would you prefer to be interviewed in person or online?

If they DO NOT meet inclusion criteria: Thank you for expressing interest in this study. Unfortunately, you do not currently meet the criteria to be selected for an interview.
INTERVIEW QUESTION ROUTE

Subject Number:
Interviewer:
Date:
Time:

[Begin by introducing self, thanking the participant for making it, explaining the research information sheet, and reminding them they can choose to not answer a question at any time within the interview]

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me and participate in this interview today. Again, I asked you hear to help me understand the rejection that can occur when people use dating applications.

To begin, I would like to know more about you and your experiences within dating apps. Remember, this is not a test, and all I need are your thoughts and opinions on some things. There are no right, wrong, or good answers. To be sure that I accurately understand what you are sharing, I would like to use a tape recorder. I may also take some notes, but I want to be sure I fully understand what you are sharing. Is that all right? Remember, you can choose to not answer any of these questions for whatever reason.

Introductory demographic questions:
1. To start, what is your gender?
2. How would you describe your race?
3. How would you describe your ethnicity?
4. Do you identify as a person with a visible or invisible disability?
5. What country are you from?
6. Do you have anything else about your identity you would like to share?

Use of technology
1. Now, I am going to ask you questions about your use of mobile dating. First, what drew you to use dating apps?
   Probe: Are you still using the first app you joined when you started mobile dating?

2. Do you think people can experience "love at first sight" on dating apps?
   Probe: How likely is it that you have a match when you log-on to a dating app?

3. When do you feel a relationship begins on dating apps?

4. How would you define rejection within mobile dating apps?

Defining rejection
5. In order to help me learn all the different ways rejection can happen, I am trying to collect as many terms or types of rejection that can happen. I am going to provide you some index cards, on these cards I want you to write down all of the different “types” or “ways” things could end on a dating app. Feel free to take your time and let me know when you have written as many as you can think of.
   5.1 Looking at these words, can you group these cards based on their similarities and differences?

   5.2 Can you place the types of rejection in order from most to least likely to hurt feelings?
      Probe: Can you explain why you arranged the types of rejection this way?
5.3 Can you place these in order from clearest to most ambiguous?

Probe: Can you explain why you arranged the types of rejection this way?

How do you think ambiguity in rejection is connected to a sense of hurt feelings?

In what ways have you been rejected in mobile dating?

Narrative experiences of rejection

6. Can you tell me the story about “how things ended” on a dating app? Share whatever comes to your mind about what happened along the way. Take as much time as you need.

Probe: Walk me through the various messages you sent to each other, or other ways you used the app during this event.

6.1 Thinking about what you just shared, I need your help to understand this event from your point of view. In this short story, what would be the chapters and title you would want me to use?

Probe: What themes or words would you use to describe how you felt after this rejection?

6.2 Would you be willing to share the story about the most considerate rejection you have experienced on a dating app?

6.3. As with your previous example, what chapters and titles would you use to describe this story?

Probe: What made this form of rejection more considerate?

How did you react after being rejected?

Was there ever a time during your mobile dating when a rejection was a “good” thing?

6.4 Would you be willing to share the story about the worst rejection you have experienced on a dating app?

6.5 As with your previous example, what chapters, titles, and themes would you use to describe this story?

Probe: What elements made you consider this event the “worst”?

6.7. Do you have any other notable experiences of rejection you would like to share?

Rejection and Technology

7. Have you been rejected by someone you thought you had a strong connection with within an app?

7.1 What made you think the connection was strong?

7.2 How did you recognize you were being rejected?

8. Do you find yourself thinking about these previous rejections as you continue to use dating apps?

8.1 What motivates you to switch from one dating app to another?

8.2 Have you ever been rejected by the same person across different dating apps?

9. If you could go back in time, what are three things regarding rejection you would warn your past self about before using mobile dating apps?

10: IF they mention COVID-19 and/or Social Distancing THEN:

10.1 How have your experiences of rejection changed since COVID-19?

10.2: In what ways has social distancing affected your use of dating apps?

10.3 How has COVID-19 changed the way you think about mobile dating?

10.4 Have you encountered new “types” of rejection since social distancing?

Thank you again for your participation. Do you have any recommendations of other people who could be contacted for an interview about their own rejection experiences within mobile dating apps?
## CONDENSED CODING SCHEME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sub-codes</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Processing</strong></td>
<td>Alternatives</td>
<td>This rejection does not matter, there are other people on the application.</td>
<td>&quot;When you are getting matches and talking to people, it feels less urgent and less hurtful&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ambiguity</td>
<td>It is hard to tell that a rejection has happened.</td>
<td>&quot;You don’t know why [they have not responded], it could be good or bad&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Depersonalized</td>
<td>When rejectees feel a rejection is not related to who they are (i.e. their interests, personality, attractiveness).</td>
<td>&quot;[In face-to-face rejection] it’s a very visceral reaction! On these app, you are very detached&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mental State</td>
<td>These rejections impact a dater differently depending on their emotions at the time.</td>
<td>&quot;If you are having a tough time in live, and not getting a lot of responses in dating apps, it feels a lot more like rejection.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rationalizing</td>
<td>Daters can understand why they were rejected.</td>
<td>&quot;You have to know statistics; you are going to have to go through those people [rejectors] in order to reach success&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rejections</strong></td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Being told by the rejector that a relationship will not develop.</td>
<td>&quot;Someone telling you they aren’t interested, just in my experience, almost never happens&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different goals</td>
<td>Identifying that you and the rejector have opposing/incompatible interests.</td>
<td>&quot;Some people on the app are just there to hook up...so if you do not want anything sexual that’s a form of rejection&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ghosting</td>
<td>The rejector unilaterally decided to stop interacting with the rejectee.</td>
<td>&quot;Ghosting, where all of sudden someone stops talking and responding&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Left on Read</td>
<td>The rejectee can see a rejector has received their message but is choosing not to respond</td>
<td>&quot;Left on read is you sent a message, and you can get the notification that like they read that, but they never end up responding&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Left Swipe</td>
<td>Someone indicates they do not want to “match” with your profile during the matchmaking phase.</td>
<td>&quot;Oh, I am actively rejecting this person by left swiping on them.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unmatch</td>
<td>A rejector uses the functions within a dating application to remove a match from their profile,</td>
<td>&quot;Unmatching is where you, I guess you feel strongly enough about it that you don't want the other person...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>&quot;Wasted time&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;When you are sending them paragraphs, and they are responding with one sentence, they are obviously wasting your time.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>Rejectees felt the time they spent talking to someone did not lead to any positive results.</td>
<td>&quot;I have developed mental space for you. I'm sitting, remembering these things to be able to ask. I know your cat's name.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rejection AND Time</td>
<td>Daters explained that the same rejections could feel different depending on how much time they spent conversing with their rejector.</td>
<td>&quot;If you only ever chatted online, then there's no need to [directly] reject someone&quot;.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection OVER Time</td>
<td>Using mobile dating applications for a period of time played a role in rejectees' interpretations of rejection.</td>
<td>&quot;At first, I was like 'Why aren't people responding'...as you kind of get more experienced, you're like, Oh, no, I'm competing and a lot more people than I thought.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response Time</td>
<td>The amount of time spent between messages in a conversation with a prospective partner, an indicator of ghosting.</td>
<td>&quot;A form of rejection is when they're not responding in a timely manner. So if you were to respond a month later that's definitely rejection.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Responses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Confused</td>
<td>Rejectees not understanding why a rejection had occurred.</td>
<td>&quot;You don't hear from them and it's just, you're just like, why? Was it me? Like, you, you end up asking questions&quot;.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defeated</td>
<td>A strong reaction to rejection when daters were frustrated by a lack of relational success over time.</td>
<td>&quot;I got off Tinder, it just became the same conversations, the same stupid things, and I didn't want to talk to anybody on Tinder anymore&quot;.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Embarrassed</td>
<td>When rejectees feel foolish because they perceived an emerging relationship as important and their rejector did not.</td>
<td>&quot;That was a big rejection for me because I felt like I had been totally fooled.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhausted</td>
<td>Being tired of going through the process of deleting the record of the conversation.</td>
<td>&quot;I get exhausted of swiping and meeting new people, and having...&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief</td>
<td>mobile dating. Dreading starting over with matchmaking. When rejectees were put at ease by a rejection. Could be from people they would have rejected or came to find were different than they seemed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>A sensation of hurt that follows being rejected.</td>
<td>the same conversation with somebody, and then usually doesn't go anywhere.&quot; &quot;Our goals were different and I don't think I would have like cut it off myself&quot; &quot;I was feeling down because he piqued my interest very quickly and I really did like him. And then it just went away. quickly as it came&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Research Information Sheet

Title of Study: Romantic miscalculation on dating applications: Definitions and experiences of mobile dating micro-rejection

Principal Investigator (PI): Sean Kolhoff
Communication
(989) 621-3322

Faculty Advisor: Stephanie Tong
Communication
stephanie.tong@wayne.edu

Key Information about this Study
1. Participation in the project is voluntary and you may end your participation at any time.
2. This study is exploring the use of rejection in mobile dating applications, and you will be participating in an interview that will ask you questions about your use of mobile dating apps and experiences with rejection. The interview will last about ninety minutes.
3. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you.
4. You will receive a $40 Amazon gift card as compensation for your participation in this study, and information from this study may benefit other people in the future.
5. There is no alternative form of participation for this study.

Purpose
You are being asked to be in a research study of romantic rejection within mobile dating applications because you have identified that you are an adult between 18 and 25 and have previously used these applications to seek a heterosexual relationship. This study is being conducted online. The estimated number of study participants is 40.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study explores how people experience rejection on dating applications (apps). The use of dating apps has led to new rejection strategies. Rejection can occur often in mobile dating. Strategies include direct and indirect actions, which can be hard to interpret. A person’s understanding of how a dating app works, his or her views on relationships, and the imagined rewards of a potential partner could influence how rejection is understood. Daters may also differ in their responses to rejection. Some may adapt their strategies and hope for success in future conversations. Others may become disheartened and leave dating apps entirely.

Study Procedures
If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to participate in an interview regarding your previous use of mobile dating applications. Specifically, you will be asked questions about your previous use of these devices, decision making when evaluating potential romantic partners, and responses to dating rejection. You will first complete a brief phone interview to provide demographic information and determine eligibility. Then, you will be asked a series of questions related to your use of mobile dating applications, understanding of rejection within these spaces and previous experiences of rejection. You may choose not to answer a question at any time and still participate in the study. Your identity will remain anonymous, and you will be assigned a participant identification number and pseudonym during transcription and analysis. This interview will take approximately ninety minutes.

Benefits
As a participant in this research study, there will be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.
Risks
There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

Study Costs
Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

Compensation
For taking part in this research study, you will be paid for your time and inconvenience. You will receive a $40 Amazon gift card as compensation for your participation in this study at the completion of the interview.

Confidentiality
All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight (e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.) may review your records.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

If audiotape recordings of you will be used for research or educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised. You have the right to review all recordings and transcripts of the interview, and recordings will be deleted at the end of the study.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal
Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you are entitled to receive.

The PI may stop your participation in this study without your consent. The PI will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for you to continue. The decision that is made is to protect your health and safety, or because you did not follow the instructions to take part in the study.

Questions
If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Sean Kolhoff or one of his research team members at the following phone number (989) 621-3322. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call the Wayne State Research Subject Advocate at (313) 577-1628 to discuss problems, obtain information, or offer input.

Participation
By completing the interview, you are agreeing to participate in this study. Additionally, participation in this research is for residents of the United States over the age of 18; if you are not a resident of the United States and/or under the age of 18 you cannot be interviewed for this study.
Dating App Users:
Help us learn from your online experiences!

Romantic Miscalculations on Dating Applications

Research Volunteer Opportunity
Help us explore the effects of rejection within dating apps on young adult mobile daters. This study will let us understand how emerging adults identify and process rejection when seeking out romantic relationships.

- Interviews only
- Participants will receive $40

Location and Time Commitment
- One 90-minute interview session
- Meet at a time and place you choose (Online interviews also available)

You may be eligible if:
- You are a mobile dating application user (Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, etc.)
- Are between 18 and 25
- Using apps to develop heterosexual romantic relationships

Interested in participation or have questions?

CALL or EMAIL
Mobile Dating and Rejection Study

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REFERENCES


Smith, A. (2016). 15% of American adults have used online dating sites or mobile dating apps. Pew Research Center.


ABSTRACT
ROMANTIC MISCALCULATION ON DATING APPLICATIONS: DEFINITIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF MOBILE DATING MICRO-REJECTION

by

SEAN KOLHOFF

August 2021

Advisor: Dr. Stephanie Tong

Major: Communication

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Millions of emerging adults use mobile dating applications (MDAs) daily in their efforts to find a romantic partner. However, the processes these daters use to interpret and react to rejection have received little attention. Not every attempt to develop a relationship can be successful. As daters evaluate profiles on these apps and interact with potential partners, they may miscalculate their perceptions of compatibility and encounter rejection. Within MDAs, rejection could be a passive or active declaration by an individual signifying they do not want to initiate or escalate a potential relationship. These various forms of rejection are conceptualized in this project as micro-rejections. This project uses qualitative methods to explore how heterosexual emerging adult mobile daters define and experience these speech acts in their attempts to develop relationships. After interviewing 41 daters, I identified differences in the way mobile daters classify and process rejection within their mobile dating interactions. These differences were influenced by a dater’s perceptions of affordances within dating applications and the emotional impact of micro-rejections within these spaces.
AUTobiographical Statement

Sean James Kolhoff is the Director of Forensics at Ferris State University. Prior to completing his Ph.D. from Wayne State University, Sean completed his Bachelor of Science degree in Political Science (2013) and a Master of Arts in Communication (2016) from Central Michigan University. He primarily researches the intersection of mobile and interpersonal communication with a specific focus on understanding perceived affordances within technologies through qualitative research.