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Tinder un-choosing. The Six Stages of Mate Discarding in a Patriarchal Technology

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Abstract

We analyse rejection experiences in mobile dating applications (MDA), in particular Tinder, based on the variables of gender and age. To do so, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with forty (40) heterosexual Tinder users (10 women aged 18-28 years, 11 women aged 40-60, 10 men aged 18-28, and 9 men aged 40-60). Results showed that rather than explicitly hostile experiences, users encounter a gamified soft-rejection technology where being not-selected or discarded (or not-selecting or discarding others) emerges as an apparently harmless element of a dating experience that is structured into six successive stages (self-classification, selection of partners, match, first conversation, progress, face-to-face). We discuss these findings, concluding that this paradigm may be new but it still mirrors traditional structures of machismo and ageism.

Keywords: rejection; gender; age; Tinder; online dating

Introduction

This paper analyses rejection experiences in mobile dating applications (MDA) depending on users' gender and age. We narrowed our investigation to the Tinder app, which, in 2021, was the most used MDA service (Mansoor Iqbal 2021).

To the best of our knowledge, rejection experiences in MDA are still an unstudied topic. One of the previous references on the subject is Tila M. Pronk & Jaap J. A.

Denissen’s (2019) rejection mindset theory. According to this theory, the multiplication of MDA’s potential partners increases users’ tendency to reject. Tinder becoming, consequently, a rejection technology.

Pronk and Denissen (2019) also applied gender lenses to their study, concluding that women users were more likely to reject. Other researches have briefly mentioned rejection when studying heterosexual women’s negative experiences in MDA (Kalyani Chadha, Linda Steiner, Jessica Vitak and Zahra Ashkotrab 2020; Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henri 2017; Urszula Pruchniewska 2020). Luca Andrighetto, Paolo Riva and Alessandro Gabbidiani (2019) explored the issue of gendered rejection in MDA, concluding that both men and women experience social exclusion after a rejection, but only men convert that feeling into hostility, as illustrated by the Bye Felipe campaign, which “calls out dudes who turn hostile when rejected or ignored” on Tinder (Alexandra Tweten 2015; Frances Shaw 2016).

On the other hand, the relationships between age and rejection in MDA have yet to be studied at all (Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan and Liat Ayalon 2017; McWilliams Summer and Anne E. Barrett 2014). Consequently, we propose the following research question:

RQ: What are the gender and age differences in rejection experiences on Tinder?

To answer the question, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with forty (40) heterosexual Tinder users (10 women aged 18-28 years; 11 women aged 40-60; 10 men aged 18-28, and 9 men aged 40-60). Based on the previous research, we expected histories of explicit misogyny (Andrighetto, Riva and Gabbidiani 2019; Chadha et al. 2020; Maria DelGreco and Amanda Denes 2020; Powell and Henry 2017; Laura Thompson 2018; Tweten 2015). Due, perhaps, to the lack of preceding research, and the insights of ageing studies (Margaret Cruikshank 2003), we also expected a considerable presence of ageism.

Nevertheless, our findings suggest a different approach. Rather than explicit hostile experiences of misogynist and ageist rejection, users reported encountering a gamified (Sabrina Sobieraj and Lee Humpreys 2021) soft-rejection technology where being not-selected or discarded (or not-selecting or discarding others) emerges as an apparently harmless element of the dating experience. Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) already defined heterosexual offline courtship as a gamified, market-driven, experience. Thus, Tinder connects with this tradition but makes it explicit through its design. This reminds us of Gaby David and Carolina Cambre's "swipe logic" theory (2016), which describes how Tinder's interface reduces interconnection to an accelerated yes/no binary that, additionally, is framed as a spontaneous entertainment. In our conclusions, therefore, we sought to understand this further by analysing it through Eva Illouz's "negative choice" theory (2018): the rejection of commitments in the name of individual freedoms.

Literature Review

Gender differences in MDA

MDA perpetuate socially gendered scripts, both in the users' experiences of the app (Francesco Communello, Lorenzo Parisi and Francesca Ieracitano 2021), and in its own design (Rena Bivens and Anna Shah Hoque 2018; Caitlin MacLeod and Victoria McArthur 2018).

There is scientific consensus about gender differences in Tinder and other MDA. Regarding motivations, while men often use the app to seek casual sex (Milena Ribeiro Lopes and Carl Vogel 2017) and short-term relationships (Sindy R. Sumter and Laura

Vandesoch 2019), women's motivations are closer to social interaction and long-term relationships (Olga Abramova, et al. 2016). When women users do seek casual sex, they are less open to admitting it than men users (MacKenzie A. Christinsen 2020), and they are generally more concerned about the impact on their social reputation (Lopes and Vogel 2017).

When designing their profiles, men are likely to include more photos (Gareth Tyson, et al. 2016); while women's pictures tend to highlight youth and physical attractiveness (Abramova et al. 2016; Communello, Parisi and Ieracitano 2021). Although self-presentation concerns are thought to affect women greater, there is empirical evidence on the impact of body standards on men as well (Andrea Waling, et al. 2022).

When seeking the perfect match, women look for common interests and other traits that imply a stable relationship (Susan Sprecher, Alexis Econie and Stanislav Treger 2018), as well as worrying about safety concerns (Pruchniewska 2020), while the masculine focus is inclined toward sexual attractiveness (Abramova et al. 2016; Sprecher, Econie and Treger 2018). Women view more profiles than men (Jenny van Hoof 2020; Tyson et al. 2016), although they receive greater interest in the form of matches (Christensen 2020; Tyson et al. 2016). Once the match is made, men users are commonly the first to open a conversation (Elisabeth Timmermans and Cédric Courtois 2018).

Overall, men spend more time on Tinder (Abramova et al. 2016; Lopes and Vogel 2017). Women's shorter use of the app may be a consequence of exposure to higher levels of harassment (Christensen 2020; DelGreco and Denes 2019). Women are also less open to face-to-face meetings with their online partners (Communello, Parisi, and Ieracitano 2021).

From an intersectional perspective, research has shown how MDA contribute to mandatory heterosexuality (Christensen 2020; Hoff 2020), transphobia (Bivens and Shah Hoque 2018), and racism (Shantel Gabrieal Buggs 2017; Thompson 2018). Kenneth R. Hanson (2021) describes MDA as white and heterosexual, while Buggs (2017) analyses the implementation of anti-racist politics by mixed-raced women in contemporary dating cultures. Of course, intersectional approaches also demonstrate how queer, trans, BIPOC, and other varying masculinities are subject to harassment in MDA cultures.

Age differences in MDA

There is a clear lack of research on age differences concerning MDA (Hannah R. Marston, Kelly Niles-Yokum, Sarah Earle, Barbara Gomez and David M. Lee 2020; McWilliams and Barrett 2014). Older users' motivations and intergenerational relations have been the main topics of earlier research. On the one hand, researchers coincide in pointing out casual relationships and one-night stands as more desirable goals among younger users, while older ones prefer to seek long-term love (Christensen 2020). On the other, while men users look for younger and same-age partners, women users seek older men partners (Abramova et al. 2016). However, this can change as users get older: while men tend to seek younger partners at any age, women are more inclined towards younger partners as they get older (Abramova et al. 2016).

Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan and Liat Ayalon (2017) define online dating as an ageist arena. This includes older users' profiles (especially women) not showing the harmful consequences of ageing. Also, a depiction of a normative way of ageing –healthy, active, and intellectual–, while common ageing experiences are considered "asexual" or non-desirable. Eden M. Griffin and Karen L. Fingerman (2017) compared straight and homosexual older users' practices, founding a prevalence of gay users on the following topics: desire for a relationship, shared experience, and romance.

McWilliams and Barrett (2014) pointed out additional issues. First, separations and widowhood are more likely to appear in older users, especially women. Secondly, previous relationships tend to engender more positive views of one's freedom, especially among women. Third, traditional dating spaces are ageist and youth-focused. Consequently, and lastly, older users try to portray a more youthful image of themselves by lying about their age, photos and hobbies (for women), or their financial status (for men).

Rejection, ghosting, and consent

Pronk and Denissen's rejection mindset theory (2019) describes MDA as a rejection-encouraging technology. They explain this psychologically: the multiplication of potential partners provokes "dissatisfaction and pessimism about finding a mate" (395). Their experiment also found out that women were more likely to experience such pessimism, thus being more prone to reject.

When discussing rejection in MDA, Illouz (2018) defines a technology that turns "the subject into a consumer of sex and emotions, entitled to the right to use or dispose the commodity at will" (23). For her, Tinder's dynamics of rejection respond to our current "negative choice" paradigm. This paradigm is coming to the fore at a time when traditional structures and contracts of socialisation have shifted towards a new model of individual self-ownership. This is the result of capitalistic efforts to spread neoliberal market dynamics to all social aspects, including affective ties. Although gamified and market-driven dynamics have traditionally determined heterosexual courtship (Ehrenreich 1983), they have been made particularly explicit in the hyper-connected

MDA culture (Sabrina Sobieraj and Lee Humpreys 2021). This implies dynamics of choice: the possibility of individually selecting from several alternatives. Although this has some positive outcomes in the form of personal freedoms, beneath its emancipatory marketing, there lies not only neoliberal competitive rhetoric, but also emotional de-responsibilization and a sense of ontological uncertainty towards relationships that are easy to break without further explanation. "Negative choice" means exactly that: "rejection, avoidance, or withdrawal from commitments, entanglements, and relationships in the name of freedom and self-realization" (Illouz 2018, 19-20). Or, to put it another way: "the choice to unchoose" (21).

A well-documented rejection (or un-choosing) phenomenon is ghosting: one partner's decision to cease the conversation without further explanation (Leah E. LeFebvre 2017). Leah E. LeFebvre, Mike Allen, Ryan D. Rasner, Shelby Garstad, Aleksander Wilms and Callie Parrish (2019) found five traits that push users to ghost – "convenience, attractiveness, negatively valenced interaction, relationship state, and safety" (2019, 12)–, and three indicators that ghosted people noticed when the disengaging occurs –"modified communication, lessening interest, or change in relationship status" (14). Elisabeth Timmermans, Anne-Mette Hermans and Suzanna J. Opree (2021) showed that both *ghoster* and *ghostee* blame the other partner, although many surveyed users also blame themselves. Additionally, *ghoster* and *ghostee* roles are interchangeable, with users reporting having embodied both (Jhanelle Oneika Thomas and Royetter Tavernier Dubar 2021). Thomas and Dubar (2021) described positive outcomes for the *ghoster* and negative for the *ghostee*, especially their self-esteem (Timmermans and Courtois 2018). However, Raúl Navarro, et al. (2020) lessen ghosting's psychological impact, not finding any correlation between being ghosted and loneliness, helplessness, or lesser satisfaction.

When linking rejection and gender, feminist studies become a necessary source. Men's persistence despite a clear no-signal is common (Kristen L. Zaleski, et al. 2016). As unequal social scripts perpetuate men's objectification of women, rejection by women is seen as an attack on their masculinity (Julia Metz, Kristen Myers and Patricia Wallace 2021; Thompson 2018), and is commonly answered with rage or jeering (DelGreco and Denes 2020; Powell and Henry 2017; Pruchniewska 2020; Tweten 2015). Contrarily, Kath Albury, Anthony McCosker and Clifton Evers (2021) interviewed 22 young men searching for post-rejection hostility, and rather than anger and impropriety, they found out that they responded to post-rejection shame with individual emotional management.

In any case, women rejecting men while using MDA are potentially exposed to misogynistic reactions (DelGreco and Denes 2020) –especially young women (Powell and Henry 2017)–, as mentioned in studies on heterosexual women's negative experiences of online dating (Chadha et al. 2020; Inés Crosas Remón and Pilar Medina-Bravo 2019; Pruchniewska 2020). Thompson (2018) lists common ways in which men's hostility occurs after a no-signal: body-shaming, insulting, insisting and threatening with rape. This hostility also occurs when there is no response, i.e. when men users are ignored (Shaw 2016).

The situation is worse at the intersection of several identity markers, such as age, race or sexuality (Chadha et al. 2020). To the point that Stephanie Madden, Melissa Janoske, Rowena Briones Winkler and Amanda Nell Edgar (2018) name "misogynoir" to the harassment experiences faced by BIPOC women online.

Methods

Participants

Data for this study was taken from 40 semi-structured interviews with heterosexual men and women who swipe for the opposite sex on Tinder. We received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from our university.

To explore possible age differences in uses and practices, both sexes were divided into different age groups (10 women aged 18-28 years, 11 women aged 40-60, 10 men aged 18-28 and 9 men aged 40-60). Women and men between 29 and 39 years old were consciously excluded because we were seeking more differentiated age extremes that facilitated the psychosocial comparative analysis. Our pre-analysis showed that 40 to 50 and 50 to 60 adults shared some common dating experiences: the analogic dating practices vs. digital, or the number of previous relationships. On the other hand, the 29 to 39 age group got discarded for different reasons: they show hybrid practices from digital to analogic, and they share psychosocial characteristics with both the 18-28 and 40-60 groups, making the inclusion of this age group a difficulty for the age comparison.

The study was conducted in Spain (Barcelona), and the sample was fully formed of Spanish women and men. We employed snowball and quota sampling, with quotas on age and gender, following the criteria that they needed to be regular Tinder users and differed regarding their professional or educational background. This technique allowed us to recruit through referrals the required sample for the study. To collect primary data sources, researchers shared on their social media a post with a call for participation.

Due to the high heteronormative binary logic of Tinder's interface, the sample was limited to users who followed this logic. Additionally, and due, perhaps, to the snowball sampling and the lack of pre-designed quotas, the final sample of interviewed users was racially all-white, and we lack BIPOC perspectives. This is, of course, a severe limitation that must be repaired in further research.

After obtaining the participants’ permission, the interviews were conducted face-to-face in private settings or online depending on the interviewees’ individual preferences and lasted for an average of around 45 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised.

Data analysis

For the coding process, we initially organised the data around the categories created in the interview guide, which acted as a coding scheme, implying that all major sections of the interview guide became coding categories. We then developed inductive categories based on the interview material about rejection experiences when using Tinder (e.g., “What happens when you reject someone in the dating app? Which are your experiences in this regard?”) or (“How do the people you reject react? How do these behaviours make you feel?”). Then we establish the relationships between emergent categories and existing themes.

Note on researchers’ positionality

Feminist studies require disclosing the place from where we are researching. As communication scholars and feminist researchers, we conduct this investigation to define contemporary ways of technified ageism and machismo. Our team is composed of women, non-binary and men members of different generations.

While developing the research we had to make some renounces. Notably, intersectional approaches. Against our will, we limit our research to white, cis, and heterosexual users, from a strict binary perspective. We also limit our theoretical approach: queer, masculinities, and anti-racist perspectives stayed out of scope. We are completely aware of the limitations. Therefore, we discuss them in the final section and encourage our results to be confronted with future diverse research.

Results

The interviewed users view Tinder, in general, as an experience that entails the possibility of rejection. They explain this rejection trope because of the interface and the gamified usability of the app, easily "swiping left" to discard uninteresting users. This can be explained through David and Cambre's "swipe logic" theory (2016) –the impact of the app's interface in encouraging de-responsible rejection.

Indeed, the first rejection experience that interviewed users noticed is how easy it is to reject others. This comes with an increasing awareness of the app's rejection mechanism, which helps the interviewed users to deal with the first experiences of being rejected. After initial bewilderment or insecurity, when they come to understand the mechanism, they tend to accept rejection better, or rather, to relativize this form of tech-mediated discarding. This implies becoming aware of the "superficiality" and "objectification" of the app.

> […] at first I felt a bit bad. But once you understand the way Tinder works and you do these things too, you realise it's a game and that's just the way it is. (Man, 23 years old)[1]

If together with Pronk and Denisse (2019), we think about Tinder as a holistic rejection technology, then we can interpret our results as a schema of different stages in which rejection might potentially emerge. This development appears funnel-shaped: as users advance towards a relationship, fewer people move forward to the next stage. After codifying and inducting the interviews' responses, we conceptualised six shared stages: self-classification, selection of possible partners, match, first conversation, progress, and face-to-face date/continuity. Below, we describe how rejection varies in each of these stages, in our sample. We can draw a common path from a lesser impact on self-esteem during the first stages (self-classification, selection of possible partners, match, first conversation), towards a higher risk of the emotional impact of rejecting/being rejected during the later stages (progress, face-to-face date/continuity).

First stage. Rejection in the self-classification stage

The first reported rejection moment is, paradoxically, self-imposed. It happens through self-classification in the app and is shaped as aspirational self-censorship when considering certain profiles "out of the league".

The self-rejection experience of our sample is gendered. Women interviewees consider attempts to match with "out of their league" profiles as a "waste of time". On the one hand, this reminds us of studies of how women tend to highlight youth and

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[1] The extracts from interviews have been translated from Spanish by a professional translator to keep the specific jargon as close as possible to the original spoken style.

physical attractiveness in their profiles, to catch more matches (Abramova et al. 2016; Communello, Parisi and Ieracitano 2021). On the other, "out of the league" discourses may be a reason why women users see more profiles (Hoof 2020; Tyson et al. 2016) but match fewer (Christensen 2020).

Within our sample, self-rejection also affects age, with older women being more prompt to self-reject themselves when coming across an "out of their league" profile, especially when that profile is younger. We can consider this finding an example of ageism and youth-centralism in MDA culture (Gewirtz-Meydan and Ayalon 2017).

> […] you can tell that you're not in his league and that he's looking for another kind of woman that you are not. Don't go there, don't waste your time, of course […] it's like saying... that's a lovely piece of chocolate, but I'm not going to eat it, I won't be able to eat it. So there you go. Nice looking, but no, let's not even try. (Woman, 51)

Among the men interviewees, we encountered a "suspicion tendency". This implies a change in the arguments justifying failures to match "out of their league" women profiles. Rather than experience low self-esteem or self-rejection, some men in our sample tend to suspect that these profiles are fake, or are just seeking economic benefits, and hence they do not match them. This stigmatisation of the "out of the league" profiles increases in our interviewed older men: when coming across younger women profiles, they do not discard themselves based on an ageist lack of self-esteem, but they rather consider those women to be fake, or "gold diggers".

> [...] and I've come across too many cases, I'd say. There are some women that kind of want you to be financial support […] I normally spot that when you see that there's a big age difference. Of course, I put forty to fifty-four, so if one comes up, for example, who is precisely forty years old and she's what you might call a real hottie, wow she looks amazing, right? And she's saying 'I'm looking for someone

> responsible with clear ideas…' I don't know. There are certain signs that you can identify as saying that she's someone who's expecting you to sort her life out, you know? (Man, 57)

Second stage. Rejection in the selection of possible partners stage

The selection of possible partners marks the first stage where rejection explicitly appears in the form of "swiping left". Regardless of gender and age, interviewed users reported an almost non-existent impact when rejecting others. As Tinder does not show who has rejected the user, we cannot explore the impact of being rejected at this stage.

Selection occurs quickly and intuitively, due to the gamified experience of the "swiping" function (David and Cambre 2016). The interviewed users reported that photos are the first things they assess when choosing whom to swipe. When a match is made, they assess the information in the profile in greater depth before starting the conversation. Although previous research has differentiated gendered and aged preferences when selecting whom to match –information regarding relationship's stability in the case of women (Sprecher, Econie and Treger 2018), attractiveness in the case of men (Abramova et al. 2016; Sprecher, Econie and Treger 2018); long-term commitment indicators in the case of older users, one-night stands desires in the case of the younger ones (Christensen 2020)–; our sample coincides, regardless gender and age, on focusing on physical attractiveness first, and further information later.

> […] you see a photo and the photo you see, that's your guide. Normally it has to catch your attention a bit for you to go into their profile, see what it says and see if there are more photos. But the first is the one that hits you, right? If it's a yes or no. […] First the photograph and then, what comes after, well fine, it's all very welcome, but first and foremost it's the photo. (Man, 61)

Besides that, when selecting profiles through photographs, other issues appear. Here, racial traits emerged among the rejection factors. Although interviewed users justify this rejection as an individual preference, antiracist activism has shown us that below these individual decisions lies exclusionary xenophobia. These findings draw a connection with the anti-racist intersectional analysis of Tinder (Buggs 2017; Hanson 2021; Thompson 2018).

> [...] not coloured ones, I don’t usually find them attractive […] or Asian ones too? No, I don’t usually find them attractive either […] well, maybe Latin Americans I don’t find attractive either, but not the others. (Man, 22)

Third stage. Rejection in matching

Interviewed users navigate rejection experiences when assessing the number of matches they have received. If users think they have received a low number of matches, feelings of disappointment or frustration emerge.

In any case, we could not find a set number of matches that all users consider appropriate. Satisfaction and frustration are negotiated individually.

> Well, at first [getting a match] I was like "wow, look, look how many, one or two... wow". And my friend she’d say well, but that’s normal, in the end, so you go on doing your bit and getting a bit of feedback too. (Woman, 26)

If we listen to previous research, women receive more matches than men (Christensen 2020; Tyson et al. 2016). However, the men interviewed in our study do not report feelings of dissatisfaction regarding this lesser number of matches. For example, when asking older men about the number of matches, they commonly answered with satisfaction and enthusiasm. Later, when asking the specific number, they diverge between 15 and 100.

Older interviewed women disclosed the same strategy. The numbers –between 50 and 300– are higher than male users' ones. But this does not translate into greater self-esteem. Consequently, in our sample we find that users individually adapt their expectations to avoid frustration, regardless of gender and age.

However, some of the older interviewed women disclosed feeling surprised about the high number of matches they receive, not understanding why their profile called for so much attention and attributing it to Tinder usability and modern hook-up culture.

> Well, when I had the first matches I didn't even know what "match" was […]. I felt… I don't know… that people had a lot of matches. And it still happens. I don't know if people do this out of vice. "Come on, let's see who bites". I was surprised that there were a lot of matches. (Woman, 44)

Fourth stage. Rejection in the first conversation

In our sample, is men who usually start the conversation. Although this is similar to what previous research has concluded (Timmermans and Courtois 2018), we encountered a change in this script among some women who start the conversation if they perceive that the man will not.

> I always wait. If after a couple of days I see that the guy hasn't said anything, and if I like him a lot, I give him a 'hello'. (Woman, 45)

On the other hand, the interviews showed that the passive women role is interiorised and perpetuated by interviewed men users, who expect to start the conversation themselves. But we also noticed an ongoing change in this pattern in a younger men interviewee, who reported including the words "you write first if you want to" in his profile description.

> Most of the time, unfortunately —and that's why I put the thing about 'you write first if you want' in my profile— most of the time I have made the first move. I'd say 80/20. (Man, 25)

Additionally, one of the interviewed older women reported that there is an ongoing trend, not based on age, or gender: waiting until the person who has gotten the match writes the first message. We did not encounter this dynamic in any of the other interviews.

> Now I have seen that there is a not-written code. I have seen that many people say that, who makes the match should be the one that should start. […] If he gets the match, he starts. And if you do it, you start. (Woman, 44)

If we attend to traditional scripts, women users should experience annoyance or frustration when not receiving the first message. Ageist stereotypes suggest that older women should be the ones suffering the highest emotional impact from not being talked to. Or patiently waiting for the man to start the conversation. Nevertheless, several of the interviewed older women reported not waiting until receiving the message, and, if the interest is strong, directly writing to their matches.

> Well, I open it and, first of all, I look at the photo. I look at the profile information. And if it fits, then: 'hello, how are you?' […] Because, here… playing hard… We are not here to waste time. At least I am not here to waste time. (Woman, 51)

Fifth stage. Rejection in the relationship progress

The first stage of the relationship progress is answering the first message. Interviewed users reported that, if the message is not good enough, they do not respond. Rejection occurs, but it is not explicitly expressed, thus becoming ghosting (LeFebvre et al. 2019) –one partner's decision to cease the conversation without further explanation.

Interviewed women reported experiencing explicit sexual messaging by men at the beginning of conversations. This is mainly rejected, both by undoing the match and even using the platform's tools to report the profile. However, no interviewed men admit to having initiated any conversations this way.

Sexual insistence is reported by interviewed women users beyond the first message. These experiences help us think of men's persistence after a no-signal, which has been particularly explored in previous research (Metz, Myers and Wallace 2021; Thompson 2018; Zaleski et al. 2016).

> There was a way to report the person and so I'd end up reporting them so that they could block that person […] I have sometimes felt, well like that, kind of humiliating, too, a bit. (Woman, 48)

If the conversation progresses, another key moment is the exchange of phone numbers, usually to continue the conversation on WhatsApp. Within our sample, refusing to give one's phone number is seen as a clear signal of rejection. Regarding gender, we found that men users tend to associate switching to WhatsApp with better usability and comfort; while women usually view it as implying a higher level of complicity and emotional commitment.

> […] if I give them my WhatsApp, or like, or my phone number to someone or they give theirs to me, you suppose there's a certain interest, something more. (Woman, 26)

This is when we find that there is a greater expectation of commitment among both genders and age groups, and thus rejection may provoke a greater emotional impact. From here on, rejections are supposed to be justified. In addition, remarkable differences emerge regarding gender and age. Older interviewed women develop a higher level of commitment as the conversation progresses in time and intensity. We can further understand this if we attend to previous research on how both women (Abramova et al. 2016; Lopes and Vogel 2017) and older users (Chritensen 2020) often seek more stable and durable relationships. When being rejected without explanation, these interviewed women express higher levels of frustration, which often leads to anger, but also guilt.

> When you are chatting really well with someone and they suddenly block you, people take that really badly and it happens to everyone, me too. And you ask why? What happened? What did I say? (Woman, 41)

Younger women users, however, reported finding it easier to relativize rejection, by contextualising the relationship in the MDA experience and suggesting ghosting as the best tool to reject in this stage.

> I've never left anyone by saying 'I'm leaving you'. I've just stopped talking and left it at that. [...] And that's happened to me too, huh? I can say that too. (Woman, 22)

In this regard, men users within our sample, regardless of age, adopt the same attitude as younger women users. When trying to interpret this result, we find it useful to read it through Albury, McCosker and Evers' study (2021), which concluded that rather than violence, young men's post-rejection experiences were better informed by interiorized emotional management of shame and vulnerability. In addition to their findings, in our sample we also came across how rejected users naturalize being discarded through "the way the dating app culture works" argument, externalizing the blame.

> They've rejected me, but on the app and whatever, and that's it. At the end of the day, I don't take it personally because I don't feel they know me that well (…) it's hardly my best friend and it's not someone I really like in person and that I know really well or that there's a bit of a story between us and we have friends in common. It doesn't hurt the same way. (Man, 26)

In some cases, however, men reportedly respond to rejection by refusing to take no for an answer. These are the extreme cases of misogynist insistence that other researchers have explored (Andrighetto, Riva and Gabbidiani 2019; Metz, Myers and Wallace 2021; Thompson 2018).

> […] he’d be messaging all the time, and I had a partner and he’d still talk, and I never answered and then maybe all of a sudden at 6 in the morning he’d message again, saying ‘hi, what’s up?’ or "I’m going wherever today’ and saying it was ages since I’d said anything. (Woman, 26).

Sixth stage. Rejection in the face-to-face date and the continuity of the relationship

This is the final stage of our conceptualized Tinder funnel process. Regarding our sample, we do not find any clear trend, based on gender or age, to explain the number of partners which whom a user arrives at this stage. Thus, we conclude that, in our study, the number of face-to-face encounters depends on individual traits.

The main reasons we have found for rejecting a partner at this stage, are, firstly, remarkable differences between the app profile and the “in-flesh” persona, especially in terms of physical traits. Secondly, the sense of a “lack of connection”.

> […] I’m not saying that they do it deceitfully, but a lot of the time the photos aren’t real. (Woman, 56).

In any case, interviewees described that there is a closer bond between the two people, and thus a greater emotional responsibility. This tends to lead to better and kinder communication when rejecting, and, consequently, higher rates of frustration and anger when this communication fails. As with any other traditional dating experience, frustration increases as more previous dates have happened.

> Because I don’t understand. Basically because first it’s never happened to me before and second it’s something very strange. I don’t know if he is used to doing these things. I mean, hook up with a girl, take her for a ride, […] and that’s the last she ever sees of me. If he was after a one-night stand, which is not what he told me, he

> should have told me that from the start so it doesn't end up doing my head in afterwards. (Woman, 21)

Some younger interviewed women also reported having rejected men whose main goal was casual sex. In any case, they make clear this is not an anti-sex stance, but rather a refusal of those men whose dating goal was, ultimately, only sex.

> It's not that he proposed to meet again and I refused. It's like he just proposed to meet to have sex. So I said 'no, I'll pass'. It's like, at the end of the day, you're looking for what everyone else is looking for. I don't know, it's like... If it happens, then great. But if not, don't force it. (Women, 18)

Additionally, and regarding age, we came across an important difference between women: while younger ones are up to end a relationship easily, talking with the man until the interest slowly vanishes away; older women expect clearer instances, with silence and breakups affecting them emotionally harder.

Finally, we did encounter one experience of extreme misogynist aggression on a Tinder date. We repeat it here in full.

> I turned around, they brought the beers and whatever, and I was chatting on the phone and as I didn't want the guy to hear, I moved away a bit and he seized the moment, but you'd never imagine that someone's going to spike your drink, I mean that's mental […] Anyway, I didn't like the guy much and I'd already told a friend to come to get me and all that, and thank God I did, because if I'd liked him, just imagine. I mean the idea is that you meet to hook up because, in theory, that was, that's the plan, so why do you need to drug the person? He was going to do something much worse to me, I don't want to imagine what he was going to do to me, so just imagine. (Woman, 45)

Discussion

When designing this research, we expected to encounter experiences of hostile rejection. Based on the previous literature, we anticipated such stories as living proof of explicit misogyny. Due, perhaps, to the lack of preceding research, we also expected strong evidence of ageism. However, after analysing the data from the interviews, we made an interesting finding: rejection may not be the best concept –or feeling– to explain the way discarding works on our Tinder sample.

Illouz's theory of the "negative choice" (2018) emerges as a better framework to interpret our results. As stated above, Illouz's "negative choice" paradigm defines an ongoing dynamic, especially reinforced by MDA culture, in which "rejection, avoidance, or withdrawal from commitments, entanglements, and relationships" are commonly justified "in the name of freedom and self-realization" (19-20). This is the right "to unchoose" (21), or "to opt-out of relationships at any stage" (21), including the six stages we have defined here.

In terms of rejection, we found that earlier contract structures and emotional implications no longer work for the interviewed users. In terms of un-choosing, however, we explicitly find the discarding dynamics beneath the gamified experience they report (Sobieraj and Humpreys 2021), as well as the lack of emotional responsibility when abandoning a relationship at any time, and the users' naturalisation of the way the app works. As one interviewee noted: "*the thing is that once you get how Tinder works and you do it as well, you appreciate that it's a game and that's just the way it goes*" (Man, 23).

Consequently, in our sample, we did not find rejection, we found gamified un-choosing, perfectly graphic by its "swipe logic" (David and Cambre 2016). This gamified un-choosing responds to a new economy of interpersonal ties "that seems to be structured like a market, that is, as a set of abundant possibilities, which the subject must seize and choose in order to satisfy and maximize his or her well-being, pleasure or profit" (Illouz 2018, 16). Although a gamified market-driven economy of courtship has been traditionally present in heterosexual flirting (Ehrenreich 1983), it has been made particularly explicit in Tinder's logic, and it also accurately describes the matching dynamics that we have observed in our results. Moreover, it requires a process that trivialises the other's feelings, as well as an emotional de-responsibilization that, as seen earlier, is now rebranded as individual freedom. Therefore, to further understand our results we can try reinterpreting Pronk and Denissen's rejection mindset (2019): rather than a rejection paradigm, our sample uses Tinder as a technology of un-choosing.

The individual choice to un-choose, as we found in Tinder's rejection logic, hides traditional dynamics of men's de-responsibilization and women's emotional responsibility. It particularly affects older women, especially those educated in the earlier heterosexual courtship model. And it avoids criticism because it is, apparently, the result of an individual choice, rather than a systematic unequal structure. The case is the same, as shown above, with race and ethnicity: xenophobic and racist discarding of potential partners is self-justified as personal preferences.

Conclusions

Rejection experiences on Tinder might be described from the concept of un-choosing. Rather than hostility or hard emotional impact, through our interviews, we found that discarding, or being discarded, is naturalised as the normal outcome of a gamified and market-oriented app. The un-choice paradigm includes the individual right to abandon a relationship in any of its phases as a legitimate personal choice and hence proof of self-ownership. In turn, the trivialisation of the other's feelings, as well as the lack of emotional responsibility, are the violent consequences of this new heterosexual form of relationship.

Regarding gender and age, the un-choosing paradigm mirrors earlier inequalities of machismo and ageism. As shown in our results, it is older women who are cast aside by the choice to unchoose, and who suffer the highest rates of anxiety caused by the uncertainty surrounding contemporary relationships. The individual right to discard, rather than setting apart gender and age inequalities, seem to perpetuate them and conceals them under the rebranded rhetoric of personal choices.

Limitations and further research

This study is not without limitations. First, our qualitative approach leaves no room for abstractions: results cannot be applied to the whole reality of Tinder's rejection dynamics. However, we do believe that our in-depth qualitative approach has led us towards a new theoretical framework, namely un-choosing, which may be useful to develop new quantitative methods. In addition, self-reporting in interviews can be prone to bias. Finally, we envisage some clear research paths for further assessment of our results. First, a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the experiences of older women, whom we have observed to suffer the most from this new paradigm. Second, analysis of how un-choosing applies to non-heterosexual people, including homosexual, bisexual, pansexual and other queer sexualities. Particularly directed, comparison studies between heterosexual dating app cultures and other on and offline dating cultures. Also, MDA masculinities should be explored, describing the way patriarchy and ageism also affect men users. Last but not least, research on the 29-29 age group, as well as BIPOC experiences, must be compared to our results.

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