



## **Coping with online dating rejection**

A survey study on the relationship between rejection type and the used coping mechanism of  
an online dating platform user

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### **Abstract**

This survey study explored whether the rejection (ghosting, unmatching, or text message) can predict the coping mechanism (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant) used by an online dating platform user after receiving this rejection. Although it is known that rejections on online dating platforms can significantly affect online daters' daily lives, coping with online dating rejections, it is not yet investigated in the literature on online dating. Therefore, it was assumed that online daters may cope differently with each rejection. For that reason, (former) online daters filled out a survey in which they described and selected their most recent experienced rejection, after which they indicated how and to what extent they have used different coping mechanisms. For the purpose of this research, the Coping with Online Dating Rejections (C-ODR) scale was assembled based on existing scales and literature. In general, research results showed minor differences between the different rejection types on the coping mechanisms. An explanation for this could be that coping with a rejection depends on the individual, and online daters may use multiple coping mechanisms simultaneously or sequentially. Therefore, they may or may not have recognized themselves with various items on the scale beyond specific coping strategies. Furthermore, a significant result was that online daters that were ghosted or rejected via textual message were more inclined to use emotion-focused coping than those unmatched. As this was the first study that investigated these specific factors using a new scale, future studies are recommended to further validate the developed scale, and to broaden the understanding of the mechanisms online daters use to cope with (different types of) rejections.

*Keywords:* online dating, romantic rejection, coping mechanism, match, dating platform

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### **Coping with online dating rejection**

Over the past decade, the dating world has been going through a significant transition as many singles turn to online dating, an increasingly popular way of meeting new people (Coduto et al., 2019; Pronk & Denissen, 2019). As a result, online dating platforms report a significant number of 323.9 million people worldwide dating online in 2021 (Statista Research Department, 2022a). Online dating platforms provide an opportunity to connect with others, with the accompanying reasons of finding a romantic relationship, a casual sex partner, keeping in contact with new and existing friends, or just having fun (Gatter & Hodgkinson, 2016). While before the existence of online dating, people mainly used conventional means of dating via their social networks, (religious) institutions, friends, or families to find a potential romantic partner (Bojd & Yoganarasimhan, 2021), online dating nowadays allows singles to connect with more people (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). As a consequence, one would expect more individuals to be in relationships than before. However, the opposite seems to be true: the number of single people is more prominent than ever (Alexopoulos et al., 2020; Pronk & Denissen, 2019). One of the reasons that daters give for being single is the fear of getting hurt (Apostolou et al., 2020).

Being hurt may include rejection, which is frequently experienced in online dating and typically means declining further contact with a match (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019). While online dating expands options for finding a partner, it simultaneously expands the chances of experiencing rejection (Andrighetto et al., 2019). Rejection refers to a person expressing interest in someone but gets declined as the interest is likely not to be mutual (Blackhart et al., 2009), which may have detrimental consequences for the mental and physical well-being of the rejectee (Kashdan et al., 2014). People naturally have difficulties processing rejection as it elicits the feeling of being disliked and unaccepted (Bourgeois & Leary, 2001). In addition, people believe they are less accepted and helpful to others when they encounter rejection

(Leary, 2015). Online daters can be rejected for various reasons by their match, for example, because a connection is missing, not being ready to enter a romantic relationship, or lacking mutual interests. However, it becomes mostly obscure what the reason for rejection is because the mediated environment of online dating offers specific rejection methods in which there is usually no need for accountability (Tong & Walther, 2010).

The literature has distinguished three specific methods in which an online dating rejection can be communicated, such as by ghosting, unmatching, or via a textual message (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019; Tong & Walther, 2010). Although those rejections all have the same purpose of indicating breaking contact, how the rejection appears and is perceived by rejectees differs (Alba, 2021). A possible explanation might be that each of those rejections may have different characteristics or properties. One of those characteristics may be the level of closure, as Leckfor et al. (2023) suggest that the amount of closure might play a part in how people react to rejections. Consequently, it may be likely that online daters handle these rejection types differently based on the amount of closure.

Processing and eventually overcoming the inevitable experience of rejection is performed using coping strategies, which are methods and techniques in the form of thoughts, behaviors, or a combination of both (Leary, 2015). Coping literature generally distinguishes the three types of coping mechanisms: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Endler & Parker, 1990). Because each of those strategies has a different method of handling the cause (i.e., rejection) by either removing, diminishing, or avoiding it (Blum et al., 2012), it may be likely that certain coping strategies can fulfill the negative affect elicited by certain rejection types and their characteristics.

Apart from Alba (2021), who researched in an experimental setting to what extent online dating rejection affects behavioral intentions and, as a result, assumed a specific rejection type may elicit specific behavioral intentions, so far, little is known in the literature

about how online daters cope with rejections. Thus, it is valuable to investigate how online daters cope and whether the rejection type may predict the type of coping as these contributions may extend the literature on coping with rejection, exploring how individuals behave according to the extent of rejection. Alternatively, knowing that other online daters cope similarly with an experienced rejection may provide reassurance, as it is known that going through and dealing with the same events as others gives comfort (Jaremka et al., 2020). In turn, this may rationalize the rejection experienced and eventually limit impact (Leary, 2015).

Therefore, a survey study will explore whether and to what extent receiving a specific rejection type in online dating may predict the coping mechanisms used to deal with this rejection. In doing so, respondents will be asked to report their latest rejection experience while online dating and how they have coped with that specific rejection. Resulting in the following research question of this study is: To what extent does an experienced rejection type predict the coping mechanism used by online daters?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Online dating platforms**

Within this research, the broad term online dating platforms is used, which includes traditional dating websites and apps. Those platforms are developed by multiple organizations that give users access to, facilitate matching, and enable conversation between two potentially compatible online daters (Finkel et al., 2012). While these websites are still used today, the online dating landscape is mainly dominated by apps (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2020), which are especially popular among young adults (Bojd & Yoganarasimhan, 2021). For instance, over 65% of millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) have used an online dating app (Vogels, 2020). Among the most popular dating apps are Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr (Statista

Research Department, 2022b). However, traditional dating websites were the first online dating platform at the end of the twentieth century on which people could create a profile and connect with potential matches, some of which were based on an algorithm. Successful online dating websites include eHarmony, Lexa, and Parship (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019).

Online dating is further introduced by explaining the difference in the offered features between dating on a website or app, although both fulfill the similar purpose of finding a potential romantic partner online (Chin et al., 2018). First, a dating app mainly shows one potential match at a time, requiring the user to either ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ this person (Halversen et al., 2021; LeFebvre, 2017). After that, it becomes a match upon mutual liking, or the next potential match appears on the screen (Sumter et al., 2017; Veel & Thylstrup, 2018). Unlike dating websites that allow users to search and (re)view others multiple times before making a connection (Stewart, 2022). Second, while most dating websites show potential matches based on a pre-specified location, dating apps show potential matches' profiles based on user geolocation (Barnett, 2022). Last, dating apps allow direct access to most functions for free besides requesting possible payment for additional features. As opposed to traditional dating websites that, in most cases, charge a membership before being able to start online dating (Chin et al., 2018).

Despite the differences, both types of online dating platforms also have similarities. For instance, both provide the possibility to create and search through profiles based on sexual orientation, age, or proximity preferences (Bruch & Newman, 2018) and the ability to examine, communicate, or break contact with matches (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2020).

### **Romantic Rejections**

This latter possibility of breaking contact with matches (perceived as a rejection) is frequently experienced within online dating (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019). One of the reasons could be that online daters can search through many potential matches (Coduto et al.,

2020). Moreover, it has become easier to reject someone or to be rejected because platforms provide convenient options to distance from someone by aborting the match or muting the conversation (Tong & Walther, 2010) and not physically seeing each other when declining further contact (Alba, 2021).

In fact, rejection is frequently viewed as the most damaging, unplanned result linked with new romance formation (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019), characterized by more negative than positive feelings (Bevan et al., 2012). Aftereffects of an online dating rejection may include feeling hurt, jealous, lonely, ashamed, guilty, and anxious (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019). Moreover, the same neural pathways are triggered in the brain as pain because the body alarms someone to escape the rejecter (Kross et al., 2011), particularly when the rejection comes as a surprise (Van der Molen et al., 2017). Therefore, rejection could cause a heart slowdown, even in the early stages of dating and even when there is no specific romantic interest in the other person (Van der Veen et al., 2019). which in online dating typically is the possibility of breaking contact with matches (perceived as rejection) (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019). Hence, it can be concluded that online daters' experienced rejections may significantly affect their daily lives and, therefore, their well-being.

Several studies within the online dating literature have distinguished different types of rejections (Alba, 2021; De Wiele & Campbell, 2019; Tong & Walther, 2010). In this case, two people liked each other and can start a conversation, often within the dating platform. However, for whatever reason, it was decided to break contact.<sup>1</sup> For instance, Alba (2021) distinguishes that an online dating rejection may occur either in the form of implicit or explicit rejection. It is considered an implicit rejection when an online dater sends a message

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<sup>1</sup> Although people can reject each other in the early phase of profile selection by deliberately not choosing to like or swipe a profile of someone that one is not interested in (De Wiele and Campbell, 2019), this research focuses solely on rejections that occur after becoming a match.

and hears nothing back from the match. When an online dater sends a message, and their match indicates breaking contact, it is considered an explicit rejection. In earlier research, Tong and Walther (2010) indicated three rejection types on dating websites ‘remaining unresponsive,’ ‘one-click rejection,’ and ‘sending a tailored refusal message.’ However, since the growth of online dating and, as a result, the change de dating world has gone through, De Wiele and Campbell (2019) investigated rejection types occurring on dating apps, specifically, ‘ghosting,’ ‘ignoring,’ ‘swiping,’ ‘rejection message,’ ‘unmatching,’ and ‘blocking.’ There can be considered an overlap after examining those different types of rejections used in previous research (Alba, 2021; De Wiele & Campbell, 2019; Tong & Walther, 2010).

Three rejection types have been identified that will be used within this research. The first rejection type that this study focuses on is ghosting. (e.g., A scenario: *a woman is swiping on her mobile device; she gets a match after a while and starts the conversation, but her match does not answer. The next day she sends another message. A few days later, she sees no reply, but the message has been read. She has most likely been ghosted.*). This rejection type has been defined as ignoring attempts of the match to reach out and breaking off contact (Timmermans et al., 2020), which entails uncertainties because no answers are forthcoming from the match (Lefebvre, 2017). In addition, ghosting can also be considered an implicit rejection as the rejecter behaves silently or is muted (Alba, 2021).

Unmatching (e.g., A scenario: *a man has a prosperous conversation with his match in an online dating platform after they have been matched. They talk for a few days. And he asks his match out on a date. Subsequently, the chat and the profile of his match disappear. The man has most likely been unmatched.*) is the second rejection type this study looks at, which can be defined as breaking contact by removing the match and the conversation (un)expectedly, done mainly by clicking on a button to disconnect the match and erase the

eventual conversation (Tong & Walther, 2010). When someone has been unmatched, the chat, including conversation (if any), and profiles on the match list will disappear for both users (Bumble, n.d.; Tinder, n.d.). Additionally, it is undecided whether unmatching is implicit or explicit (Alba, 2021). On the one hand, the rejecter remains ignorant; on the other hand, it provides an expressed way of breaking contact.

The third rejection type is called textual rejection message (e.g., *A scenario: a woman is talking on a dating website to her match. After talking intermittently for a week or two, her match tells her he is no longer interested in continuing the conversation because he is too busy for dating. The woman seems to be rejected via a text message.*). This type of rejection can be considered as receiving a textual message in the form of a match indicating breaking contact (Alba, 2021). In addition, a textual rejection message may also be considered an explicit rejection as the rejecter verbally states that further contact is being declined (Alba, 2021).

### **Coping Mechanisms**

Since exposure to rejection is almost inevitable, effective coping is essential for preserving health and well-being (Blum et al., 2012). After receiving a rejection, people use coping mechanisms or strategies to defend themselves against the additional unwanted negative feelings which have arisen (Aldwin & Yancura, 2004; Leary et al., 2007). People feel physically and psychologically better whenever the right coping strategies are applied, impacting their ability to accomplish more daily (Baqtayan, 2015). To the best of my knowledge, no specific coping mechanisms that treat coping with rejections, let alone romantic rejections (in the context of online dating), have been featured. To that end, various coping mechanisms have been examined proposed in the literature on social psychology to understand how people cope with stress during various life events have been examined (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Roth & Cohen, 1986).

To this day, there is disagreement in the coping literature on the best method for categorizing coping methods (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Therefore, traditionally literature presented different dichotomous categories, varying from coping strategies which are based on either approaching or avoiding the stressor (Roth & Cohen, 1986), the assimilation and accommodation coping theory based on crises and critical life transitions (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990), and problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping based on solving everyday stress issues (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For this study on online dating rejection, this latter distinction seems to be the most appropriate, as rejections can be considered stressors (Tong & Walther, 2010). In fact, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed next to problem- and emotion-focused coping that are, respectively, task- or person-orientated, a third dimension: avoidance coping involves a combination of both orientations two orientations.

Thus, the current study relies on this general distinction between problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance coping. Using problem-focused coping refers to all active efforts to find control over or eliminate the problem (e.g., figuring out why it happened), whereas emotion-focused coping indicates actions taken to minimize the emotional effects the rejection entails (e.g., showing emotions such as crying, laughing, or swearing; Schoenmakers et al., 2015). Last, avoidant coping refers to actions taken to avoid anything related to a stressful event (e.g., focusing on a distracting activity such as working, shopping, or partying; Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010), thus not wanting to be involved with the rejection.

### **Rejection Types, Coping Mechanisms, and Closure**

Although no unanimity is found in research about which factor determines a coping style, Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) have argued that the particular nature of the stressor may determine the coping style. Therefore, it may be likely that online daters generally use specific coping mechanisms after having experienced a particular rejection type. To that end,

the rejection type thus may be the factor determining the used coping mechanism as it is considered a stressor (Tong & Walther, 2010). As discussed earlier, each rejection type (ghosting, unmatched and textual rejection message) has the same purpose of declining further contact. However, how rejected online daters perceive the extent of rejection differs (Alba, 2021). For instance, when being ghosted, the rejectee experiences no response to their messages, and when unmatched, the rejectee can no longer see the match or conversation. Following, when receiving a textual rejection message, the rejectee perceives a verbal notification by the rejecter indicating declining contact. Therefore, it is assumed that each of those rejections may have different characteristics or properties. One of those characteristics may be the level of closure, as Leckfor et al. (2023) suggest that the amount of closure might play a part in how people behave according to rejections.

People generally do not deal well with uncertainty (Hogg, 2007). There is a general need to become a clear response and to avoid ambiguity for receiving closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Therefore, on the one hand, people desire to receive closure and, on the other hand, want to avoid closure as much as possible. As the aspect of achieving closure is motivational from nature, discomfort is perceived when not found (Leckfor et al., 2023).

Consequently, this need for closure may affect online daters coping mechanisms when rejected by a specific type of rejection. Therefore, rejection types are likely handled differently based on the amount of closure the online dater perceives from that rejection. According to Alba (2021), online daters behave more intensively upon an implicit than an explicit rejection. As beforementioned, ghosting can be seen as an implicit rejection. Whereas ghosting may feel unclear as the rejected online dater does not receive any reply and thus perceive little to no closure (Leckfor et al., 2023), a rejection via textual message at least clarifies that the match is being terminated and, therefore, may provide a sense of closure. In accordance, Freedman et al. (2016) investigated that socially rejected people who experience

closure from a rejecter in the form of a statement or reason hardly address a situation. In addition, as beforementioned, a textual rejection message may be seen as an explicit rejection, Lee and Shrum (2012) state that an explicit rejection gives more sense of control and closure over a situation because it is more likely to become an explanation for the rejection or an explanation may be requested by the rejectee, which helps to process.

Following, when being ghosted or receiving a textual rejection message, the chat (with or without conversation) remains visible after being rejected; when unmatched, the match and chat disappear immediately (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2020). Moreover, in contrast to ghosting and textual rejection message, it is unsure to what extent unmatching contains closure. On the one hand, unmatching may be perceived by some online daters as a passive action (withdrawal from the match) with the absence of a response and thus not being able to find closure; on the other hand, it is thinkable that others do find closure when being unmatched as they perceive at least the clarity that there is no longer a match allowing to move on.

Concluding, ghosted online daters may be more likely to turn to problem-focused coping than rejection types that offer a high level of closure (unmatching or receiving a textual rejection message). Furthermore, although this assumption is based on a forebode, unmatched online daters may be more likely to turn to emotion-focused coping than the rejection types that provide a noticeable level of closure. Finally, online daters rejected via text message are more likely to turn to avoidant coping than the rejection types that offer a low level of closure: ghosting or unmatching. The abovementioned assumptions lead to the following hypotheses used in this study:

***H1:*** When an online dater has been ghosted, they are more likely to use a problem-focused coping mechanism than when they have been unmatched or refused with a text message.

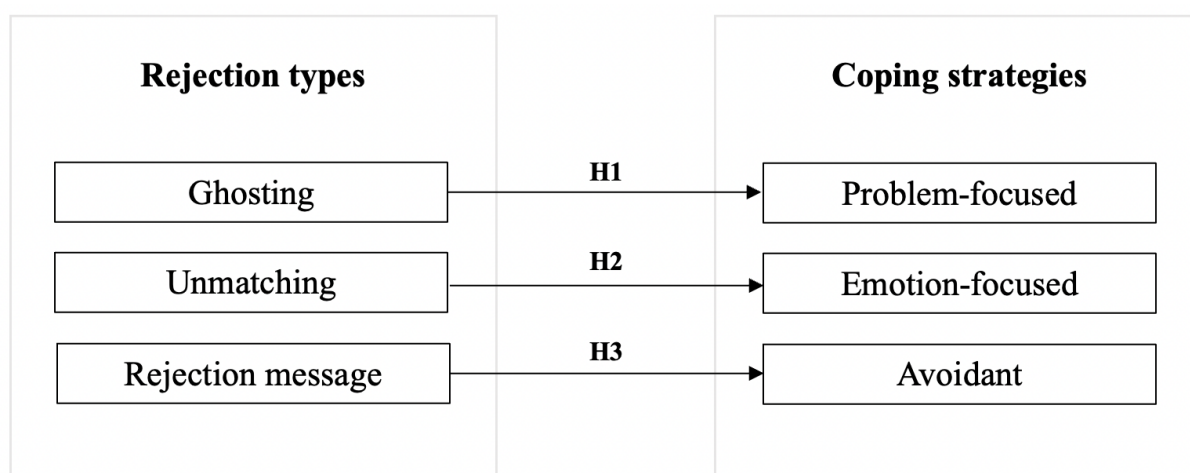
**H2:** When an online dater has been unmatched, they are more likely to use an emotion-focused coping mechanism than when they have been ghosted or rejected via textual message.

**H3:** When an online dater has received a textual rejection message, they are more likely to use an avoidant coping mechanism than when they have been ghosted or unmatched.

Figure 1 shows the proposed model, concluding the hypothesized relationship between the found rejection types and coping strategies within the literature.

**Figure 1**

*Proposed model for the effect of the IV Rejection types on DV Coping strategies*



## Method

Rejection type is the independent variable of this study, consisting of three levels: ghosting, unmatching, and receiving a textual rejection message. The dependent variable is the used coping mechanism, including three coping styles: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping.

## Respondents

To participate in the survey study, the respondents needed to meet the requirements of having a minimum age of 18 and being rejected on an online dating platform. For this study, experiences with rejections on all platforms were equally valuable. A total of 370 people

participated in the current study. However, 189 participants were excluded from the study because they did not give consent ( $n = 33$ ), were not rejected on an online dating platform before ( $n = 57$ ), or dropped out of the survey ( $n = 99$ ).

Therefore, a total of 181 participants with a mean age of 26.75 ( $SD = 5.56$ ) years were included for analysis. Out of those participants, 93 (51.4%) identified themselves as male, 87 (48.1%) as female, and one (0.6%) as non-binary/third gender. Among all participants, 153 (84.5%) identified themselves as straight, four (2.2%) as gay, twelve (6.6%) as bisexual, two (1.1%) as pansexual, six (3.3%) as queer, one (0.6%) did not know their sexual orientation and one (0.6%) of them preferred not to say. Furthermore, among the participants, a total of 33 nationalities were identified. The largest group of 97 (53.6%) participants were Dutch, thereafter twelve (6.6%) reported being German, eleven (6.1%) had a nationality from the United States, five (2.8%) from Great Britain, four (2.2%) from France, four (2.2%) from Italy and four (2.2%) from Mexico. Last, 50 (24.3%) participants reported having other nationalities from countries including, for example, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Greece, India, Romania, South Africa, and Turkey.

## **Operationalizations**

### ***Rejection Types***

To find out which type of rejection the online dating platform user has experienced (i.e., their match refused to proceed with the contact), the respondents were first asked to describe their most recent experience of being rejected as testimony after they have been matched (i.e., both users have chosen to ‘like’ each other’s profiles and can communicate via a chat) by answering the following open question: “While online dating, a match rejected me as follows...”. Additionally, it was clarified that rejections could occur in different forms while online dating to make the respondent feel as comfortable as possible in sharing information about this sensitive topic. In a subsequent question, after reading a definition of

the three rejections, respondents were asked to choose one of the three rejections within a multiple-choice question that fitted the description.

The first type of rejection the respondents could choose from was being ghosted or ignored, which was explained as follows: “You and your match have talked a bit or perhaps a long time, but suddenly your match seems to not reply to your messages anymore.” The second rejection type the respondents could select was being unmatched or blocked and was explained as: “You had a match with someone, maybe also a conversation, but the entire chat and their profile seem to have disappeared (un)expectedly, which suggests your match has unmatched you.” Last, receiving a text message was explained as follows: “After a short or long conversation, your match sends you a message saying they are breaking contact with or without explaining why they are ending this match (i.e., ‘I don't feel like we're a good romantic match’ or ‘Sorry, I am not longer interested’)” is the third rejection type people could select.

### ***Coping Mechanisms***

Prior to this study, there does not seem to exist a scale that measures coping after rejection, not to mention within the context of online dating. Several scales have been proposed in the literature to measure coping, most of which are used to evaluate how people cope with stressful situations. For instance, the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ) scale (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), Measure of Affect Regulation Styles (MARS) scale (Larsen & Prizmic, 2006), Coping Schemas Inventory-Revised (CSI-R) scale (Wong et al., 2006), Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory (COPE) scale (Carver et al., 1989), and the later the abbreviated version due to of its problematic expansion, the Brief-COPE (Carver, 1997). A new scale needed to be constructed to measure which coping mechanism people tend to use after being rejected in a certain way on an online dating platform.

For the foundation of the new scale, it was decided to choose the Brief-COPE scale with 28 items from Carver (1997). The reason for choosing this scale is that it can be used to measure coping with a wide range of adversity (e.g., mental health issues, assaults, or setbacks experienced in daily life). Moreover, it is based on the three coping strategies relevant to this study: problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant. The Brief-COPE scale consists of fourteen facets that belong to one of the three coping mechanisms. Each of the fourteen facets is measured by two items (e.g., the facet of positive reframing consists of the two similar items ‘I’ve been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive’ and ‘I’ve been looking for something good in what is happening’). Whenever people score high on the facets of problem-focused coping, people may be more inclined to face the problem directly and try to solve it. Furthermore, people are more prone to act upon their emotions when facing a stressful event when scoring high on emotion-focused coping. Last, whenever people score high on avoidant coping, they may likely ignore the stressful situation (García et al., 2018). See Table 1 for an overview of the facets and their meaning. See Appendix A for an overview of all original items of the Brief-COPE scale.

In total, fifteen items have been compiled, whereby each of the three coping mechanisms (i.e., problem-focused, emotion-focused, or avoidant coping) was measured by five items resulting in the Coping with Online Dating Rejections (C-ODR) scale. After this, the Brief-COPE is referred to as the original scale and the C-ODR scale as the new scale. New items were compiled from the facets of the original scale and the literature on online dating. Moreover, when creating new items, it has been considered as best as possible what an online dater might do to take either active solving, emotional regulation, or avoiding efforts when rejected. Subsequently, explanations were given on the item selection for each subscale (i.e., coping mechanism).

The first created subscale represents problem-focused coping. First, (1) ‘asking friends and family for advice’ was formed based on the facet of informational support from the original scale. Friends and family may play an essential role for the online dater by, for example, hearing the story out and possibly giving advice about the situation; information could be obtained that may help to cope. Second, (2) ‘figuring out why the rejection happened’ was formed based on combining the two facets of active coping and planning, which were considered similar within the original scale. An online dater may want to solve the rejection by going over all actions that occurred while being matched, for example, by the things that were said, having talked too briefly or excessively, or simply having too little in common. Third, (3) ‘seeing the rejection from the positive side’ was based on the facet of positive reframing. As well as in the original scale, it may be likely for an online dater to actively try to turn the rejection into something positive by accepting the negative feelings, looking for the provided growth, and when being rejected next time, knowing what to do (better). Fourth, (4) ‘trying to re-establish contact with match’ was created because most ghosted or implicitly rejected online daters were found to re-contact their match via, for example, social networking sites because they wanted to find clarity (Timmermans et al., 2020). Fifth, it has been decided that (5) ‘dating profile changing behavior’ represents the item of proactively improving appearance. The reason for selecting this item is because it is often conducted within online dating as people eagerly anticipate how a potential match could react to their profiles (De Vries, 2016). This behavior is exhibited by online daters even more frequently when rejected (Alba, 2021; Timmermans et al., 2020). The mentioned items all contain behavior considered to solve the problem and thus belong to problem-focused coping.

The second created subscale represents emotion-focused coping. First, (6) ‘seeking comfort from friends and family’ was based on the facet of emotional support use. As well as in the original scale, it may also for an online dater be likely to ask friends and family for

emotional support emotions occurred by the rejection. In doing so, positive feelings can be obtained. Second, the facet of venting was reused for the new item (7) ‘expressing emotions’ to specify and make it applicable to multiple emotions an online dater may have after the rejection. Expressing all kinds of emotions (e.g., crying, laughing, screaming) helps an emotion-focused online dater to emit the feelings the rejection elicits. Third, the facet of humor from the original scale was changed into (8) ‘ridiculing the match’ to make the item more specific about mocking the match, which is one step further than just using humor. The reason is that there are often considered more negative than positive associations attached to being rejected (Bevan et al., 2012). Fourth, the facet of religion was reused for the new item (9) ‘seeking comfort in religion or spirituality’ because it is imaginable that there are online daters who rely on their beliefs when coping. However, the wording was changed to apply to the millennial age group that uses online dating the most and may be more engaged in contemporary beliefs (Vogels, 2020). Fifth, (10) ‘blaming self for rejection’ was reused from the facet of self-blame. As well as in the original scale, also for an online dater, it may be likely to blame oneself for being rejected. An online dater mostly gets little to no explanation for the rejection; a possible way of coping may be blaming oneself (Tong & Walther, 2010). The mentioned items all contain behavior that diminishes the problem and thus belong to emotion-focused coping.

The second created subscale represents avoidant coping. First, (11) ‘seeking distraction from friends and family’ was formed based on online daters that indicated looking for distraction in others (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019). In addition, the item was added to be consistent with the other types of coping of which the social factor was included, as there is not assumed that online daters that tend to use avoidant coping would not use their social network. Second, the item (12) ‘focusing on a new or different match,’ was added as the literature on online dating indicated this convenient tactic based on the functionalities online

dating platforms offer is frequently used. Although Timmermans et al. (2020) found this behavior among ghosters, it is considered typical avoiding behavior. Third, (13) ‘taking time off from online dating’ was based on the facet of behavioral disengagement, which means that in the online dating context, the user may disconnect from the platform. This is easily achievable as a profile can be set to inactive, a dating website can be clicked away, and a dating app can be deleted. Fourth, the facet of denial was reused for the item (9) ‘pretending the rejection did not happen’ to make it more specific. It is thinkable that an online dater may not want to think about the rejection by, for example, suppressing all concerning thoughts and thinking of other things. Fifth, (15) ‘turning to fun activities’ was created from the facet of self-distraction to make the item more specific and matching to the context of online dating. The mentioned items all contain behavior considered to avoid the problem and thus belong to avoidant coping.

For all items, participants could indicate on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) to what extent they agreed with the items. Table 2 shows the abbreviated items, and Appendix B shows an overview of the complete items within the Coping with Online Dating Rejections (C-ODR) scale.

Although a validated scale was used to assemble the new scale, and the items of each subscale were presented side by side to the respondents, low reliability. Problem-focused resulted in a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .50 ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ), and emotion-focused coping yielded a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .59 ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ), which considered poor reliability. Following, avoidant coping showed a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .21 ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ), which is basically unacceptable. Nevertheless, it is decided to continue the research because of the exploratory nature of this study. Therefore, further results should be interpreted with caution.

**Table 1***Facets and meanings in the Brief-COPE scale*

| Facet                     | Meaning                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Problem-focused coping    |                                                                                                               |
| Active coping             | Concentrating the efforts on doing something about the situation/taking action to try to make it better.      |
| Informational support use | Getting help and advice from other people/trying to get advice or help from others about what to do.          |
| Planning                  | Planning is trying to come up with a strategy about what to do/thinking hard about what steps to take.        |
| Positive reframing        | Trying to see the situation from a different light, make it seem more positive/look for something good in it. |
| Emotion-focused coping    |                                                                                                               |
| Venting                   | Saying things to let unpleasant feelings escape/expressing negative feelings.                                 |
| Emotional support use     | Obtaining emotional support/comfort and understanding.                                                        |
| Humor                     | Making jokes about it/making fun of the situation.                                                            |
| Acceptance                | Accepting the reality that has happened/learning to live with it.                                             |
| Self-blame                | Criticizing myself/blaming myself for things that happened.                                                   |
| Religion                  | Finding comfort in religious or spiritual beliefs/praying or meditating.                                      |
| Avoidant coping           |                                                                                                               |
| Self-distraction          | Turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things/doing something to think about it less.        |
| Denial                    | Saying to myself “this is not real”/refusing to believe that it has happened.                                 |
| Substance use             | Using alcohol or other drugs to feel better/to help me get through it.                                        |
| Behavioral disengagement  | Giving up trying to deal with it/the attempt to cope.                                                         |

*Note.* Data are from Carver (1997) and García et al. (2018).

**Table 2***Items abbreviations C-ODR Scale*

|                        | Items                                                     |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Problem-focused coping | 1 Asking friends and family for advice.                   |
|                        | 2 Figuring out why the rejection happened                 |
|                        | 3 Seeing the rejection from the positive side             |
|                        | 4 Trying to re-establish contact with match               |
|                        | 5 Changing profile behavior                               |
| Emotion-focused coping | 6 Seeking comfort from friends and family                 |
|                        | 7 Expressing emotions                                     |
|                        | 8 Ridiculing match                                        |
|                        | 9 Seeking comfort in religion or spirituality             |
|                        | 10 Blaming self for rejection                             |
| Avoidant coping        | 11 Seeking distraction at friends and family              |
|                        | 12 Focusing on another match                              |
|                        | 13 Taking time off from online dating                     |
|                        | 14 Pretending it did not happen                           |
|                        | 15 Turning to fun activities (sports, shopping, partying) |

## Procedure

With the help of a survey study in Qualtrics, it was investigated whether the rejection type online dating users have experienced can predict the associated coping mechanism they have used to deal with the rejection. To that end, (former) online dating users were asked to answer open and closed-ended questions concerning their latest experienced rejection and statements on how they have coped with the experienced rejection. Besides items specifically intended to measure the specific variables for this research (rejection types and coping mechanisms), questions about demographics and online dating platform use were asked.<sup>2</sup> The entire questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix C.

Before dispatching the survey, pretests in the form of two informal debriefings and two cognitive interviews among four online dating app users were conducted to learn how respondents would interpret the questions and formulate answers. Errors were noted and adjusted if the researcher considered it necessary. For instance, it turned out that several (online dating) context-specific words were not understood by three Dutch pretest participants, although they were deliberately defined where necessary. Therefore, the questionnaire was composed in English and Dutch because of distribution through social media platforms on which both Dutch and non-Dutch speakers are active.

Subsequently, respondents were sampled through convenience sampling via social networking sites (Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn) and the personal network of the researchers. When participants clicked the survey link, they were taken to the Qualtrics survey. After the welcome greeting, the informed consent with details regarding the study and participation rights was shown to the respondents, which had to be agreed upon before

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<sup>2</sup> This questionnaire was compiled together with another researcher who is also writing a thesis on associated topics. Therefore, respondents have given answers to items that belong to both studies. However, only the relevant items for this study are described in this thesis.

participating. Furthermore, it was explained that the survey would last approximately ten minutes.

Before answering the questions about demographics (i.e., gender, nationality, age, education, and sexual orientation), participants were asked whether they had been rejected on an online dating platform and could recall this experience for this study. This question was intended as a filter question, so respondents that indicated not being rejected could be excluded from the study. Furthermore, respondents were asked which online dating platform(s) they use, whether they currently use them (i.e., have an active profile), if not, how long ago they have used them, and if yes, their actual usage frequency.

Following, in the main section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked whether they could describe the latest experienced rejection on an online dating platform and subsequently choose the matching rejection type presented in a multiple-choice question. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they experienced this rejection as painful. Thereupon, statements determining the used coping mechanisms associated with the experienced rejection were asked using a 5-point Likert scale. The respondents were reminded of their choice of rejection type and the description while they answered coping items.

Last, in the concluding section of the survey, the participants could leave any last thoughts or remarks, they were thanked, debriefed, and given the researcher's contact information in case they had any questions or concerns.

### **Data Analysis**

The acquired data was transferred to Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29 for statistical analysis. A one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to test the three hypotheses and ultimately answer the proposed research question with the independent variable rejection types (ghosting, unmatched, and rejection message)

and the dependent variable coping mechanisms (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant). A MANOVA was performed instead of performing several ANOVAs because it reduces the possibility of a Type 1 error.

## **Results**

Before showing the results concerning the one-way MANOVA, several other outcomes related to the respondents and their online dating platform use will be reported. For instance, the respondents were asked which dating platforms they use or have used in the past (multiple answers were possible). First, Tinder (159) was most frequently mentioned, followed by Bumble (97), Happn, (47), Hinge (42), Inner Circle (16), OkCupid (14), Fruitz (9), Breeze (6), Lexa (4), and Grindr (4). Other mentioned platforms were Match, Her, Parship, Taimi, Badoo, Coffee Meets Bagel, Facebook Dating, Feeld, Hot or Not, Jswipe, Kippo, Lovoo, Muzmatch, Once, Plenty of Fish, Scruff, Hornet, Gayromeo, Turn up, Wavys, and Yubo. Furthermore, the respondents were asked if, at the time of completing the questionnaire, they were using any online dating platform(s). The majority, 85 (47%) of the respondents, reported currently not using any dating platforms, 54 (29.8%) stated they currently use dating platforms, and 42 (23.2%) indicated having an active dating profile but not using it. Moreover, among the respondents indicated that they currently use online dating platforms, the majority stated they use them once a week but not daily ( $n = 31$ ), followed by less than once a month ( $n = 18$ ). Finally, 99 (54.7%), most of the respondents, at the time of filling out the questionnaire, reported not being in a romantic relationship, 76 (42%) stated to be involved in a romantic relationship, five (2.8%) did not know their relational status, and one (0.6%) preferred not to answer this question. It is noteworthy that over half of the respondents concurrently indicated being single, although the majority did not actively use a dating platform.

## Experienced Rejections

Participants were asked to report the rejection they had experienced. Ghosting ( $n = 116$ ) was the most experienced rejection type. An example of this is given by a female respondent (aged 22): *“We already met three times. Then I recognized a change in texting. He did not really text me anymore, and without an explanation, we lost contact. I tried one more time, but he didn't seem really interested. On our dates, nothing like kissing, etc. happened.”* Thereafter, respondents reported experiencing rejection by text message ( $n = 36$ ) from their rejecter. An example of this rejection type is illustrated by a male respondent (aged 24): *“After our 1st date, she texted me and told me that I am a nice guy, but she did not have the thought that it was going to be something. I do not remember exactly what she said, but something along the lines that she expected more from our 1st date. She wanted to stay friends, but it did not work out.”* Unmatching was the rejection type that occurred least frequently ( $n = 28$ ). An example of this rejection type is shown by a female respondent (aged 26): *“I had a match with a guy. We talked for a short while; I saw great potential in the match. Then it was quiet for a few days. Then I asked: if you do not want to continue this match, you can just say so instead of ghosting me. Then the match and the chat disappeared; it appeared that he had unmatched me”*.

After reporting the experienced rejection, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 10 to what extent they perceived this rejection as painful, with ten being the most painful. The data show that the rejection by a textual message ( $M = 5.72$ ,  $SD = 2.97$ ) was generally rated as the most painful, followed by ghosting ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 2.63$ ) and unmatching ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 2.85$ ).

## Assumptions

Preliminary assumption checking revealed that all assumptions were met<sup>3</sup>. Looking at the descriptive statistics, overall, all rejection types scored higher on avoidant coping. Means and standard deviations of the subdimensions of the dependent variable for each rejection type were calculated and reported in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Means (SD) on the dimensions of Coping Mechanism specified for each Rejection Type*

| Dimensions of Coping Mechanism | Ghosting<br>( <i>n</i> = 116) | Unmatching<br>( <i>n</i> = 28) | Textual message<br>( <i>n</i> = 36) | Total<br>( <i>n</i> = 180) |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Problem-focused                | 2.78 (0.77)                   | 2.59 (0.70)                    | 2.93 (0.77)                         | 2.78 (0.76)                |
| Emotion-focused                | 2.45 (0.88)                   | 1.99 (0.71)                    | 2.61 (0.85)                         | 2.41 (0.87)                |
| Avoidant coping                | 3.28 (0.67)                   | 2.89 (0.70)                    | 3.04 (0.71)                         | 3.17 (0.70)                |

*Note.* Measured on a scale of 1 to 5.

## Multivariate Analysis of Variance

As all underlying assumptions were supported by the data, a one-way MANOVA was used to examine the effect of the experienced rejection (ghosting, unmatching, and textual rejection message) on the used coping mechanisms (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping). Findings yielded that overall, there was a statistically significant effect of the independent variables (experienced rejection types) on the combined dependent variables (coping mechanisms),  $F(6, 350) = 3.195, p = .005$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .899$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .052$ . Follow-up univariate ANOVAs per coping mechanism showed that there was no statistical difference in the use of problem-focused coping for the three rejection types, ( $F(2, 177) =$

<sup>3</sup> Data was normally distributed as univariate normality was assessed by the Shapiro-Wilk test ( $p > .05$ ) and boxplots, and; there were no multivariate outliers, as assessed by Mahalanobis' distance, respectively; there were linear relationships, as assessed by scatterplot; no multicollinearity: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping ( $r = .56, p < .001$ ); problem-focused and avoidant coping ( $r = .46, p < .001$ ); emotion-focused and avoidant coping ( $r = .43, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, there was homogeneity of variance-covariances matrices, as assessed by a non-significant Box's  $M$  test ( $p = .630$ ) at  $\alpha = .001$ .

1.527  $p = .220$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .017$ ). However, results show a significant score for online daters that used emotion-focused coping, ( $F(2, 177) = 4.644$ ,  $p = .011$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .050$ ) and those that used avoidant coping ( $F(2, 177) = 4.597$ ,  $p = .011$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .049$ ). These results suggest that online daters with an overall higher score on emotion-focused coping and those with a generally higher score on avoidant coping use particular rejection types notably more than other types of rejection. Therefore, to discover which specific rejection types associate with each coping mechanism, post-hoc Tukey tests were conducted subsequently.

## Multiple Comparisons

### *Coping with Ghosting*

The first hypothesis posed that ghosted online dating platform users are more likely to cope by means of problem-focused coping: at least more likely than when being unmatched or when having received a textual rejection message indicating breaking contact. Although not statistically significant ( $p = .463$ ), results of the Tukey post-hoc test showed that online daters who were ghosted were more likely to engage in problem-focused coping ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) than those who had been unmatched ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ). However, yet again not being statistically significant ( $p = .463$ ), online daters rejected via textual message were the most likely to use problem-focused coping ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) in contrast to those being ghosted (and unmatched). Taken together, these results may suggest that when ghosted, people tend to use problem-focused coping more than when unmatched but not more than when rejected via textual message. Therefore, rejection via textual message may most likely result in problem-focused coping compared to ghosting and unmatched. Because this was not as hypothesized, H1 can be rejected. However, it should be noted that the differences between the rejections were small and should be high to see an effect. See Table 3 for an overview of the mean differences between the rejection types on problem-focused coping.

### *Coping with Unmatching*

The second hypothesis posed that unmatched online dating platform users are more likely to cope by means of emotion-focused coping: at least more likely than when having received a textual rejection message indicating breaking contact. Results of the Tukey post-hoc test showed that mean score differences were significant for both textual rejection message ( $p = .011$ ) and ghosting ( $p = .027$ ) compared with unmatching on the dependent variable emotion-focused coping. Nevertheless, online daters who had been unmatched were least likely to engage in emotion-focused coping ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) in comparison to those rejected via textual message ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) or ghosted ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ). Overall, these results suggest that when unmatched, people tend to use emotion-focused coping the least in contrast to rejection via a textual message or when ghosted. Therefore, rejection via textual message will most likely result in emotion-focused coping compared to ghosting and unmatching. Because this was not as hypothesized, H2 can be rejected. See Table 3 for an overview of the mean differences between the rejection types on emotion-focused coping.

### *Coping with a Rejection message*

The third hypothesis posed that online dating platform users rejected via textual message are more likely to cope by means of avoidant coping: at least more likely than when being ghosted or unmatched. Although not statistically significant ( $p = .628$ ), results of the Tukey post-hoc test showed that online daters who were rejected via textual message were more likely to engage in avoidant coping ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) than those who had been unmatched ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ). However, yet again not being statistically significant ( $p = .164$ ), ghosted online daters were most likely to use avoidant coping ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) in contrast to those receiving a textual rejection message (and unmatched). In conclusion, these results may suggest that when rejected via textual message, online daters tend to use avoidant

coping more than when unmatched but not more than when ghosted. Therefore, being ghosted may most likely result in avoidant coping compared to a textual rejection message and unmatching. Because this was not as hypothesized, H3 can be rejected. However, it should be noted that the differences between the rejections were small and should be high to see an effect. See Table 4 for an overview of the mean differences between the rejection types on avoidant coping.

**Table 4**

*Multiple comparisons of Rejection Type on the dimensions of Coping Mechanism (Tukey post-hoc)*

| Coping Mech.    | (I) Rejection T. | (J) Rejection T. | (I-J) Mean Dif. | SE   | p     | 95% CI        |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|------|-------|---------------|
| Problem-focused | Ghosting         | Unmatching       | 0.19            | 0.16 | .463  | [-.19, .57]   |
|                 |                  | Textual message  | -0.15           | 0.15 | .578  | [-.49, .20]   |
| Emotion-focused | Unmatching       | Ghosting         | -0.47           | 0.18 | .027* | [-.89, -.04]  |
|                 |                  | Textual message  | -0.63           | 0.21 | .011* | [-1.13, -.12] |
| Avoidant coping | Textual message  | Ghosting         | -0.24           | 0.13 | .164  | [-.55, .07]   |
|                 |                  | Unmatching       | 0.16            | 0.17 | .628  | [-.25, .57]   |

Note. \*p < .05.

## Discussion

This survey study aimed to explore whether the experienced rejection type (i.e., ghosting, unmatching, and textual rejection message) can predict the used coping mechanism (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant) after being rejected in online dating. This research reasoned from the assumption that each of those specific types of rejection may result in a specific type of coping because of certain properties those rejections entail. To that end, respondents indicated their most recent experience of rejection within online dating and answered fifteen statements (five per type of coping) about the extent to which they recognized their used coping behavior. Although results suggest that the perceived type of

online dating rejection does not necessarily predict the coping strategy used as hypothesized, the findings of this study offer some valuable insights.

### **General Findings**

Contrary to the expectations, no significant difference was found between ghosted online daters and those who reported being unmatched and rejected via a textual message toward problem-focused coping (H1) and between online daters rejected via a textual message and those who were ghosted and unmatched (H3) toward avoidant coping. Therefore, neither the first hypothesis that assumed ghosted online daters would be more likely to use a problem-focused coping strategy (opposed to the other rejection types) nor the third hypothesis that supposed those rejected via a textual message would be more likely (than the other rejection types) to use avoidant coping was supported. This is in accordance with the ambiguity in the literature on which factor determines how people cope and which type of coping is most effective after receiving a specific rejection type. To that end, it is uncertain to what extent the type of coping is determined by (the personality of) an individual or (the nature of) the stressor (Costa et al., 1996). Furthermore, García et al. (2018) state that the three main elements that constitute the coping process are the event (i.e., the rejection), impact evaluation, and subsequently exhibiting a certain coping behavior, which as well indicates it may be that not necessarily the type (and nature) of rejection determines someone's coping strategy but do people cope individually based on their personality.

Additionally, there might be other potentially relevant factors that may determine how an online dater copes after an online dating rejection. For instance, gender may be a factor that plays a part in determining the way of coping (Monteiro et al., 2014). Women, namely, naturally tend to use emotion-focused coping more than men as they show more psychological distress (Matud, 2004). Moreover, people are inclined to combine multiple coping mechanisms when dealing with one stressor (Brescia & Cuite, 2019). Presumably, this

might be an explanation for finding those insignificant results, as respondents possibly recognized themselves in various items, which indicates they may cope in various ways when rejected. Apparently, online daters chose different ways of coping, which may not necessarily belong to one coping mechanism.

Although no evidence was found that unmatched online daters are more likely to use an emotion-focused coping strategy, at least more than when having received a textual rejection message or when being ghosted (H2), nevertheless other significant results were found. Those findings show that online daters rejected via a textual message, followed by those being ghosted, are more inclined to use emotion-focused coping than those unmatched. One possible explanation may come from the respondents in this research, of which the majority reported unmatching to be the least painful among the three rejection types. It is known that rage is a reaction to being mistreated, resulting in emotions that are painful (Lazarus, 1991). Irritation, resentment, and annoyance are considered other aspects of this negative emotion (Shaver et al., 1987). However, anger is directly related and positively connected to emotion-focused coping (Scheck & Kinicki, 2000). For this reason, it might explain that online daters that experienced more painful rejection types, such as a textual rejection message, and ghosting, used emotion-focused coping more than those unmatched.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The results of this study may provide both theoretical and practical implications for research about coping with online dating rejections. First, for the purpose of this study, the C-ODR scale was compiled to assess the used coping style of the online dater after being rejected. This new scale was self-constructed based on an existing scale and online dating literature, as there was not yet a validated scale measuring coping with online dating rejections. This scale was a major component of this study. To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first that has designed a coping scale applicable to the context of online dating,

which can be considered innovative and novel. This scale could therefore serve as a basis for other scholars with affiniton for online dating research.

Second, as this study used actual scenarios and various samples, which may increase the external validity and verifiability. While other online dating research focused on rejection within fictional scenarios (Alba, 2021; Tong & Walther, 2010), this survey study used (former) online dating users. Therefore, realistic behavioral intentions were measured concerning coping with online dating rejections, adding relevance to the findings. Moreover, as opposed to research focusing on online daters from specific countries (Timmermans et al., 2020), this diverse sample of online daters reported 33 nationalities, which may help apply the results to the rest of the population worldwide online daters. Despite the samples of online daters that have experienced being unmatched and rejected via textual message being relatively small (i.e., online daters self-reported their rejection experience) due to the exploratory nature of the study, it may reflect the proportion of rejections happening on online dating platforms.

Third, considering the detrimental effects of rejection and the convenient methods online dating platforms offer to reject (Alba, 2021), transparency should be offered. To achieve this, an environment should be created on online dating platforms which enhances relationship success or at least improves user satisfaction. The importance of interaction between online daters has been undervalued by businesses, as they have been concentrating on creating algorithms for the purpose of bringing individuals together (Smith, 2005). Instead, online dating platforms could focus more on maintaining the number of failed encounters (e.g., unanswered conversations in terms of ghosting) and provide tips within the platform (e.g., improving a profile, choosing the most suitable matches, or providing opening lines). Additionally, Alba and Slongo (2020) discovered that people blame themselves less when an apology has been made for the behavior of others, which may result in a more positive

attitude to dating companies when reflecting on the rejections happening. Therefore, improved interactions may benefit online dating companies as well.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Three possible limitations are pointed out; thus, the overall findings of this study must be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, deficiencies may be recommended for future research. First, although a validated scale measuring coping mechanisms in the context of stress and literature on online dating was used to assemble the new C-ODR scale, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  on all subscales (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping) yielded low reliability. To that end, low reliability may hinder the chances of finding significant results in this research. It is noteworthy that the scale was used for the first time in an online dating context for exploratory purposes and did not necessarily fail to provide insights. However, for future studies, it is recommended to further develop and validate this scale by, for instance, considering changing items and carrying out a factor analysis.

Second, because coping with online dating rejection is a specific and narrow topic, little prior research has been found that could provide adequate theoretical foundations. To that end, sources from other contexts have been applied as much as possible because finding specific references was considered difficult. However, some sources on coping were considered dated and, therefore, may collide with the relatively novel field of online dating literature. Therefore, own typology has been featured for the reasoning of the hypotheses, presented in the theoretical framework premised on one of the possible characteristics of rejection types: closure and for the development of the C-ODR scale. Therefore, it is recommended for future scholars to continue the development of further research in the scope of online dating, coping, and rejections.

Third, this research solely focused on coping with especially negative feelings that arise from online dating rejections. However, compared to rejections in offline situations,

those in online dating may be less impactful. To that end, in another online dating study, while discussing rejection experiences, respondents said they felt indifferent (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019). Moreover, as beforementioned, rejection frequently occurs in online dating, which might not be surprising when looking at the constantly growing group of online daters users (Coduto et al., 2019). Furthermore, as speculation, some online daters may perceive being rejected as a relief because there was no connection, or the conversation did not flow nevertheless, and they would need to reject otherwise. As there has been found little research on more positive or neutral coping with rejections, it may be recommended for future research to take this into account.

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### Appendix A: Brief-COPE scale

|                                                                                     | I haven't been<br>doing this at<br>all | I've been doing<br>this a little bit | I've been doing<br>a medium<br>amount | I've been<br>doing this<br>a lot |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things         | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 2. I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 3. I've been saying to myself "this isn't real".                                    | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 4. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to myself feel better.                    | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 5. I've been getting emotional support from others.                                 | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 6. I've been giving up trying to deal with it.                                      | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 7. I've been taking action to try to make the situation better.                     | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 8. I've been refusing to believe that it has happened.                              | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 9. I've been saying things to let my unpleasant feeling escape.                     | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 10. I've been getting help and advice from other people.                            | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 11. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it                | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |
| 12. I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem                | <input type="checkbox"/>               | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/>              | <input type="checkbox"/>         |

more positive.

- |                                                                                                                                          |                          |                          |                          |                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 13. I've been criticizing myself.                                                                                                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do.                                                                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone.                                                                            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16. I've been giving up the attempt to cope.                                                                                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17. I've been looking for something good in what is happening.                                                                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 18. I've been making jokes about it.                                                                                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 19. I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to movies, watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping, or shopping. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 20. I've been accepting the reality of the fact that it has happened.                                                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 21. I've been expressing my negative feelings.                                                                                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 22. I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.                                                                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 23. I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do.                                                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 24. I've been learning to live with it.                                                                                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 25. I've been thinking hard about what steps to take.                                                                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 26. I've been blaming myself for things that happened.                                                                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

27. I've been praying or meditating. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
28. I've been making fun of the situation. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

## **Appendix B: C-ODR scale**

### **Problem-focused coping**

1. I asked friends and family for advice about what to do with the rejection.
2. I tried to figure out why the rejection happened (e.g., repeating the conversation in my head)
3. I tried to see something good or positive because my match rejected me, it is okay to feel negative and this situation will make me stronger
4. I tried to re-establish contact with my match via social networking sites or phone number.
5. I tried to change my profile to make myself more appealing for possible new matches

### **Emotion-focused coping**

6. I looked for comfort and emotional support among friends and family (e.g., telling my social network about the rejection or hugging someone).
7. I expressed my emotions (e.g., crying, laughing, screaming, and cursing).
8. I ridiculed/mockered about my match or how they rejected me.
9. I sought comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs (e.g., meditating, yoga, birth chart) to deal with the rejection.
10. I blamed myself that my match rejecting me (e.g., thinking of all the things I might said wrong)

### **Avoidant coping**

11. I sought distraction from friends and family (e.g., doing something fun together).
12. I focused having a new match or other existing matches.
13. I took some time off from online dating (e.g., by deleting the platform or deactivating my dating profile).
14. I pretended it had not happened and moved on with my life (e.g., not talking about it and not letting myself think about the rejection)
15. I turned to fun and distracting activities (e.g., sports, shopping, partying)

## Appendix C: Survey

Dear **(former) online dating platform user**, 🙋

Thank you for your interest in our survey, which is a part of two theses being conducted to complete the master's degree in Business Communication & Digital Media at Tilburg University. We are particularly interested in your experiences with **online dating** and **rejections**. Using your answers, we can gain insight into how types of rejections affect users on different levels. For this study, you will be asked to answer several questions related to this topic.

This survey will take approximately **10 minutes** to complete. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your participation at any time without a reason or negative consequences. In addition, you can request access and rectification, erasure, restriction, or object to the processing of your data. The data will be collected and processed confidentially and anonymously according to the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations). Your anonymized data will be stored for the next 12 months.

In case you have any questions, remarks, or complaints, please get in touch with the researchers **Ellen Klein Hesselink** (e.kleinhesselink@tilburguniversity.edu) or **Kirsten Bijl** (k.m.bijl@tilburguniversity.edu).

On the next page, you will be asked for consent.

By clicking "I agree" on the button below, you confirm that:

- You are at least 18 years old;
- You have read the information on the previous page carefully;
- You know that you can withdraw from this study at any time without a reason and negative consequences;
- You know that you can contact one of the researchers in case of questions or comments;
- You give permission to store your anonymized data for the next 12 months.

☐ I agree and want to participate

☐ I do not agree and want to stop

---

Let's start with the survey! As was written before, our study is about dating rejections. In everyday life, people get rejected daily. Romantic rejections, therefore, happen too.

As this is a crucial element of our study, we ask you...

Have you ever experienced being rejected through a dating platform after having matched

with someone?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

#### End of Block: Introduction and Informed Consent

---

#### Start of Block: Demographic Items

The following questions are about **your demographic characteristics**. Please select the options that are most applicable to you.

-----

To which gender do you identify most?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other, namely: \_\_\_\_\_
- 

What is your age in years? (for example: 26)

\_\_\_\_\_

-----

Please specify your country of nationality.

▼ Afghanistan ... Zimbabwe

-----

What would you consider to be your sexual orientation?

- ☐ Straight
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Demisexual
- ☐ Pansexual
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other, namely: \_\_\_\_\_

End of Block: Demographic Items

---

Start of Block: Dating Apps

The following questions are about **your dating life** and **dating platform use**. Please select the options that are most applicable to you.

-----

Are you currently in a romantic relationship?

- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
  - ☐ I don't know
  - ☐ Prefer not to answer
-

Are you currently using one or multiple online dating platforms?

- ☐ Yes, I'm using dating platforms
  - ☐ I have a profile on a dating platform, but don't use it actively
  - ☐ No, I am not using any dating platforms
- 

On average, how often do you use online dating platforms?

- ☐ Less than once a month
  - ☐ Once a month
  - ☐ More than once a month but not weekly
  - ☐ Once a week
  - ☐ More than once a week but not daily
  - ☐ Daily
  - ☐ Multiple times a day
-

Which online dating platforms do you currently use or have you used before? (multiple answers possible)

- ☐ Tinder
- ☐ Bumble
- ☐ Hinge
- ☐ Happn
- ☐ Grindr
- ☐ Match
- ☐ Fruitz
- ☐ Breeze
- ☐ Her
- ☐ Lexa
- ☐ eMatching
- ☐ Christian Mingle
- ☐ Parship
- ☐ Taimi
- ☐ OkCupid
- ☐ InnerCircle
- ☐ Another, namely... \_\_\_\_\_

**End of Block: Dating Apps**

---

**Start of Block: Attachment Styles**

In romantic relationships, people attach to others in different ways. Imagine you would have a romantic relationship or think about your current relationship. How would you respond to the following statements? Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree.

|                                                                         | Strongly disagree     | Somewhat disagree     | Neither agree nor disagree | Somewhat agree        | Strongly agree        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| It helps me to turn to my romantic partner in times of need             | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner               | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back              | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I find that my partner doesn't want to get as close as I would like     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away                 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I try to avoid getting too close to my partner                          | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I don't worry about being abandoned                                     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

End of Block: Attachment Styles

Start of Block: Rejections

Rejections can occur in different forms while online dating. In this study, we focus on four main rejection types.

We have shortly defined them to give you a better understanding:

Being ghosted or ignored 📱👤

You and your match have talked a bit or perhaps a long time, but suddenly your match seems to not reply to your messages anymore.

Being unmatched or blocked ➡️❌

You had a match with someone, maybe also a conversation, but the entire chat and their profile seem to have disappeared (un)expectedly. This suggests your match has unmatched you.

Receiving a text message (without an explanation) 💬👤🙅

After a short or long conversation, your match sends you a message saying they are breaking contact without explaining why they are breaking the contact (i.e., "No, thanks" or "I don't want to be in contact with you anymore").

Receiving a text message (with an explanation) 💬👤📝

After a short or long conversation, your match sends you a message saying they are breaking contact by explaining why they are ending this match (i.e., "No, I am too busy for dating right now" or "No, don't think we fit together").

Please think of the last time you were rejected on a dating app by your match (i.e., your match refused to proceed with the contact). We are interested in your personal experience. Describe this experience in your opinion below.

*While online dating, a match rejected me as follows...*

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Which type of rejection best fits your described experience from the previous question?

- ☐ Being ghosted or ignored
  - ☐ Being unmatched or blocked
  - ☐ Receiving a text message (without explanation)
  - ☐ Receiving a text message (with explanation)
- 

Approximately how many messages did you exchange with your match before they rejected you?

- ☐ 5 or less
  - ☐ 6 to 15
  - ☐ 16 to 30
  - ☐ 31+
- 

How painful did you find the rejection you described? Please rate on a scale from 1 being not painful at all and 10 being extremely painful.

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6
- ☐ 7
- ☐ 8
- ☐ 9
- ☐ 10

**End of Block: Rejections**

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**Start of Block: Well-Being: Stress**

The following statements are about how you felt the moment you experienced the rejection you have just described:

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements.

|                      | Strongly<br>disagree  | Somewhat<br>disagree  | Neither<br>agree nor<br>disagree | Somewhat<br>agree     | Strongly<br>agree     |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| I felt calm          | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I felt secure        | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I was tense          | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I felt at ease       | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I felt upset         | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I was<br>worried     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I felt<br>satisfied  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I felt<br>frightened | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

End of Block: Well-Being: Stress

Start of Block: Coping Mechanisms

The following statements are about how you have coped with the rejection you described:

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements.

|                                                                                              | Strongly disagree     | Somewhat disagree     | Neither agree nor disagree | Somewhat agree        | Strongly agree        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| I asked friends and family for advice about what to do with the rejection.                   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I tried to figure out why the rejection happened to cope better next time.                   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I tried to re-establish contact with my match via social networking sites or phone number.   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I tried to see something good or positive in the fact that my match rejected me.             | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I tried to think rejection is a common experience and therefore it is okay to feel negative. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

If there is anything else you did to cope with the rejection, please describe this below (either in Dutch or English).

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**End of Block: Coping Mechanisms**

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**Start of Block: Self-Esteem**

The final(!) statements are about your self-esteem and how you felt during and just after the rejection.

Please indicate to what extent you disagree or agree with the statement during that time.

|                                                                            | Strongly disagree     | Somewhat disagree     | Neither agree nor disagree | Somewhat agree        | Strongly agree        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| I felt that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I felt that I have a number of good qualities                              | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| All in all, I am inclined to feel that I was a failure                     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I was able to do things as well as most other people                       | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I felt I did not have much to be proud of                                  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I took a positive attitude toward myself                                   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| On the whole, I was satisfied with myself                                  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I wish I could have more respect for myself                                | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I certainly felt useless at times                                          | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

End of Block: Self-Esteem

Start of Block: Debriefing

To save and close the survey, please go to the next page. ➡

Thank you for participating in our study! Your answers will help us tremendously. 😊🙏

To give you an idea of how your dating experience help us, let us elaborate on our studies...

**Kirsten:** I'm looking at how rejection types might affect the rejected person's well-being: stress and self-esteem. So, might someone be less stressed when receiving a thanks with explanation? I'm also trying to discover whether someone's attachment style influence their response. Those were the first couple of questions on how you might react in relationships.

**Ellen:** I am wanting to find out whether people handle certain online dating rejection types differently. So, is being unmatched, ghosted or receiving a text message associated with either (trying to) solve the problem, absorb emotions, or avoid the rejection? Despite not being much research on this topic yet, I assume the following:

- Being ghosted or ignored will result in a form of coping where people want to solve the problem.
- Being unmatched or blocked OR receiving a text without explanation will likely result in a form of coping where people behave emotionally to process the rejection.
- Lastly, receiving a text message with an explanation will result in avoidant behavior, i.e. not feeling the need to engage with the negative experience and look for distractions.

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If you would like to ask or share anything about this survey, please let us know here!

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End of Block: Debriefing