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Repercussions of Rejecting Unwanted Advances: Gender Differences in Experience and Concern

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ABSTRACT

Here we investigated how a history of experiencing unwanted advances—both sexual and romantic—impact a person's stress and strategies when rejecting future advances. In this study ($N = 465$; 71% women), women reported experiencing unwanted advances earlier in life compared to men, and these women were more likely to have greater worry over such advances. Additionally, women tended to worry more than men about the repercussions of rejecting these advances (e.g., being hit, being yelled at). Lastly, women were more likely to employ a myriad of strategies (e.g., run away, call a friend) to ensure their safety when rejecting an advance. In contrast, men were more likely to remain friends with the rejected person. Ultimately, women have to deal with rejecting advances at an early age and this early onset has consequences for future dating.

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Flirting is one of the first steps in signaling that a person is romantically and sexually interested in a potential partner, and to be successful during the flirting interaction one must leave the situation open for multiple possibilities (Tavory, 2009). For instance, one may begin to flirt with someone already in a relationship or single (Burch et al., 2021; Wade & Slemp, 2015), which can make the interaction a vulnerable experience. This vulnerability taps into the idea that flirting is an "open secret," where the two people involved have minimal knowledge of the other person, however, their shared knowledge is that the flirting event can have various outcomes (Tavory, 2009) and one outcome may be rejection or being told that the pursued is not interested.

A rejection occurs when the person who initiated the flirting is rejected by the desired partner (Baumeister & Dhavale, 2001). Just as the flirter can be successful during the ambiguous situation or be rejected, when a person rejects an advance, they may be successful (they are left alone) or unsuccessful (the advance continues), or they are retaliated against or punished. Rejection is correlated to later aggression; when someone is rejected by a romantic prospect, they sometimes retaliate (Leary et al., 2006). Even in unromantic contexts, those who are socially excluded become more aggressive and punitive toward their rejecters (Twenge et al., 2001). This robust relationship between rejection, aggression, and violence has been argued to stem from threatening one's honor, specifically in men (Henry, 2009). However, it has also been hypothesized that this rejection-aggression link is motivated to return to one's "homeostasis" (Chester & DeWall, 2017); it can be rewarding for individuals to be aggressive after a rejection as it creates a balance in the interaction.

This attempt at homeostasis can directly impact the rejecters' sexual health and well-being by decreasing safety and increasing stress. For instance, daily stress is negatively associated with sexual activity and satisfaction (Bodenmann et al., 2010). Further, if those who retaliate feel rewarded for their aggression and continue to engage, the person who rejected them may have

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an additional increase in stress. Secondly, this aggression decreases one's safety, a cornerstone of sexual pleasure and health (Reis et al., 2021; Sladden et al., 2021). Consequently, this stress and unsafe situations can affect sexual well-being. In one study that investigated the effects of complying with unwanted sexual advances, the researchers observed a negative relationship where women who complied with unwanted advances more often reported less sexual satisfaction in their relationships (Katz & Tirone, 2009). This safety issue and negative consequences to sexual health may be why women, in particular, have specific strategies they engage in to minimize danger and preserve their sexual health and agency.

These behavioral strategies have been organized into five categories (Goodboy & Brann, 2010): (1) departure (e.g., leave the location), (2) friendship networks (e.g., seek friends for help), (3) cell-phone usage (e.g., fake a phone call), (4) ignoring (e.g., do not flirt back) and (5) facial expression (e.g., do not make eye contact). However, these behaviors do not exist in a vacuum and various factors can affect these rejection strategies. For example, rejecters may not have friends or a phone present or the ability to leave (e.g., on a moving bus or train). Other factors, like the number of suitors, their demeanor, or even the culture can influence potential strategies. For example, women who score higher on masculine honor beliefs (i.e., the belief that aggression is justifiable and necessary) found men's aggression toward a romantic rejection to be more appropriate (Stratmoen et al., 2018) and tend use more avoidant and deceptive tactics themselves (Stratmoen et al., 2020). In addition, ineffective strategies must be amended; if ignoring the suitor is not working, for example, another strategy must be used.

Retaliation from rejection can be an active and ongoing cycle (Chester & DeWall, 2017) and women may have to invest more time in rejecting unwanted romantic advances. Women are at greater risk of being victims of sexual and romantic violence compared to men (Chen et al., 2020) in various romantic contexts (e.g., "hook-ups"; Flack et al., 2007). Heterosexual men also report having more conflicts over sexual desire with their partners, compared to women (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1996). Therefore, women would have to engage in specific behavioral strategies to help create safer environments during romantic rejections, even at an early age. However, there has not yet been a study that examines the history of rejecting romantic advances (e.g., at what age this began) and/or how that may impact one's worry of retaliation and behavioral strategies.

Current Study

Based on the aforementioned research, we conducted a cross-sectional study to document men and women's experiences in rejecting unwanted romantic advances and their affective and behavioral responses when one has to reject an unwanted advance. We hypothesized (H1) that women would have to reject romantic advances earlier in life compared to men, and (H2) that women who have had to reject romantic advances earlier in life would have greater worry of retaliation. We then conducted exploratory research to quantitatively replicate previous qualitative research (Goodboy & Brann, 2010) by assessing how much men and women invest in worrying and rejection strategies.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 668$) were recruited from a northeastern state university in the United States between the spring 2021–2022 semester (IRB # 2021.004). Participants who did not complete the demographic questionnaire ($n = 18$), and who did not complete the outcome variables ($n = 177$) were removed. Additionally, eight participants identified as nonbinary and were excluded from analysis. Thus, our analytical sample was 465 adults (330 women; mean age = 20.39, $SD = 2.10$) who identified as 79.6% straight, 4.9% gay/lesbian, 11.2% bisexual 1.7% pansexual, and 0.6% asexual, 1.1% other (e.g., Queer), and 0.9% as prefer not to say.

Materials and procedure

Participants accessed the survey via the university's online research portal that stated the research team was interested in how individuals navigate romantic relationships. After consenting to the study, they completed a demographic questionnaire that asked them to indicate their age, their gender identity (forced choice: man, woman, genderfluid, nonbinary, and other, please specify), and their sexual orientation (forced-choice: straight, gay or lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, other, and prefer not to say). Participants then were asked to report how old they were when they experienced romantic advances: "(1) At what age did you first experience romantic advances from someone? (2) At what age did you first make romantic advances toward someone? (3) At what age did you first have to reject romantic advances from someone?"

Once they completed that portion, participants responded to an 11-item scale on worry that the research team created. They were asked, "How often do you worry about the following consequences when you are in a situation where you have to reject romantic advances?" using a scale of 0–100% of the time. A mean composite was created with higher scores indicating more worry during romantic rejection (α = .91). Lastly, they responded using a 12-item scale using a Likert scale of 0–100% of the time, "How often do you engage in the following behaviors when you are in a situation where you have to reject romantic advances?" These items were created by the researchers based on previous rejection strategy themes (Goodboy & Brann, 2010).

Results

Consistent with the first hypothesis, women ($M = 13.53$, $SD = 2.72$) were younger than men ($M = 14.53$, $SD = 2.77$) when they experienced a romantic advance from someone, $t(444) = 2.76$, $p = .006$ Cohen's $d = 0.29$. Women ($M = 14.02$, $SD = 2.60$) experienced rejecting an advance earlier than men ($M = 15.35$, $SD = 2.53$) $t(444) = 4.75$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.51$. Men ($M = 14.74$, $SD = 2.56$) and women ($M = 14.97$, $SD = 2.22$) did not differ in their age when they first made a romantic advance, $t(444) = -0.96$, $p = .30$, Cohen's $d = 0.01$.

Consistent with hypothesis 2, having greater worry regarding rejection was related to experiencing romantic advances earlier in life ($r = -.12$, $p = .009$), and rejecting romantic advances earlier in life ($r = -.15$, $p = .002$). This worry was not related to the participant making a romantic advance ($r = -.02$, $p = .72$). We then observed via a moderation analysis that women who experienced having to reject romantic advances earlier in life, $b = -1.44$, $SE = .50$, $t(426) = -2.88$, $p = .004$, 95%CI [−2.42, −0.46], had greater worry compared to men, $b = 1.17$, $SE = .82$, $t(426) = 1.43$, $p = .15$, 95%CI [−0.44, 2.79].

We then conducted ancillary analyses to assess the gender differences in the specific worries and behavioral strategies. Overall, women ($M = 36.81$, $SD = 24.72$) compared to men ($M = 18.10$, $SD = 18.84$) invested more time in worrying when they were put in situations where they had to reject a romantic advance, $t(463) = -7.91$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.01$. When investigating the 11-item worry scale ($p < .004$ Bonferroni correction .05/11), we observed men and women differed on 7 of the 11 worry items (e.g., see Table 1 for breakdown and t-tests). Similar to the worry findings, men and women differed on 50% of the behavioral strategies when rejecting a romantic advance, where women engaged in more behaviors that were safety measures, while men were more likely to remain friends with the rejected person (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations, a significance threshold of .004 [Bonferroni correction .05/12]).

Table 1. Differences between men and women in their worry when rejecting someone.

Worrying-variable	Women *M* (*SD*)	Men *M* (*SD*)	*t*	Cohen's *d*
Physically hurt	36.56 (35.06)	9.23 (18.66)	8.45**	0.87
Being harmed socially	38.72 (33.36)	30.53 (32.37)	2.43	0.25
Being yelled at	41.21 (34.32)	24.46 (31.06)	4.91**	0.50
Being touched	52.67 (35.78)	18.29 (27.35)	10.02**	1.03
Being followed	53.59 (36.13)	15.68 (25.86)	11.08**	1.13
Having to call the police	25.92 (32.41)	8.93 (22.59)	5.56**	0.57
More people harassing you	34.82 (35.38)	17.84 (27.68)	4.98**	0.51
No one helping you	40.05 (37.53)	17.37 (28.87)	6.29**	0.64
Being blamed	36.22 (37.09)	47.08 (37.09)	2.85	0.29
Being fired from a job	18.04 (29.36)	10.76 (22.51)	2.59	0.26
Not getting hired	16.20 (27.61)	9.71 (21.32)	2.44	0.25

*$p < .004$; **$p < .001$.

Table 2. Differences between men and women in their behavioral strategies when rejecting someone.

Behavioral-variable	Women *M* (*SD*)	Men *M* (*SD*)	*t*	Cohen's *d*
Deem situation as dangerous	14.61 (23.77)	4.61 (11.60)	4.66**	0.47
Walk away	55.84 (32.21)	39.85 (34.17)	4.77**	0.49
Run away	17.89 (25.27)	4.73 (11.09)	5.82**	0.60
Grab another person to help	37.08 (32.23)	17.43 (25.23)	6.25**	0.64
Call a friend to report what happened	39.15 (35.98)	16.20 (24.74)	6.78**	0.69
Call the police	6.47 (17.26)	2.77 (9.92)	2.33	0.23
Physically fight the person	2.46 (8.14)	3.73 (13.16)	1.26	0.13
Deem situation as a misunderstanding	18.88 (23.80)	25.65 (29.95)	2.58	0.26
Stay where I am because rejection was understood	36.50 (31.02)	40.80 (34.52)	1.31	0.13
Continue to talk to person	19.76 (24.36)	24.94 (25.94)	2.04	0.21
Stay and remain friends	22.82 (27.54)	34.77 (31.87)	4.05**	0.41
Laugh or joke about the situation	20.72 (26.86)	24.06 (29.57)	1.18	0.12

*$p < .004$; **$p < .001$.

Discussion

The results can be summarized as follows: women invest significant time and effort in rejecting men safely because they have a greater worry of adverse outcomes. Men do not have the same concerns. In general, women also reported rejecting more often. Having to reject unwanted romantic advances possibly stems from society's sexual script where women are supposed to be sexually attractive and accessible. Consequently, this would lead to women rejecting more often (Ward et al., 2022). Rejecting may have sexual health consequences. In one study, women who internalized these sexual scripts more often reported lower sexual advocacy (Curtin et al., 2011). Although we did not study one's stance on these sexual scripts, future research should begin to understand how rejecting and one's viewpoint toward sexual scripts can have health implications.

Additionally, women who have rejected suitors from an earlier age worry more about rejecting advances later in life and as stated above aggression from rejection may be a rewarding experience for the aggressor (Chester & DeWall, 2017) and this may lead to more retaliation or forms of stalking and violence (Nurius & Norris, 1996). Our findings did show that women were less likely to remain friends with their rejected suitors. Therefore, being more cautious during a romantic advance may prevent or decrease violence. Unfortunately, women must be observant at an early age to reject safely, resulting in greater worry in the future. This worry can impact women's sexual health as forming relationships is a cornerstone of sexual health. Based on the current findings that early unwanted advances impact future safety concerns and strategies, this then may hinder one's sexual health and attachment styles (Edwards & Coleman, 2004; Godbout et al., 2009). Our results conceptually highlight this finding. Future work should aim to understand how these worries impact dating behaviors and anxiety and how this may influence dating satisfaction.

Besides the novel relationship between exposure and worry, these data support previous qualitative findings on rejection strategies (Goodboy & Brann, 2010). In this quantitative study, women tend to engage in strategies that help distance them from the rejected and seek help. These would be categorized as the departure and friendship strategies (Goodboy & Brann, 2010). Men were more likely to stay and remain friends with the rejected which highlights men's minimal investment in their own safety when rejecting. Qualitatively, men report leaving a situation; however, the current findings posit that the investment in this strategy is limited and may be context-specific (Goodboy & Brann, 2010).

Ultimately, these behavioral strategies and worries demonstrate the inequity women are faced with when navigating the dating world. Women leave a situation or seek help after rejecting a suitor compared to men who can easily stay and befriend the rejected. These findings highlight that women hold more responsibility for dating safety compared to men, which is inequitable because women benefit greatly from dating (e.g., experience pleasure and sexually positive feelings; Shepardson et al., 2016) but the stress and danger of rejecting impact these positive outcomes.

Not only do women have to worry about the physical and psychological consequences but

women must also engage in more emotional and cognitive costs. Although not studied here, future research should address the adverse health outcomes of rejecting unwanted advances. For example, in an experiment where participants were randomized into a negative life experience diary condition compared to a control those who were randomized to write about a negative life experience (e.g., sexual abuse, loneliness) experienced an increased cognitive effort which was then associated with lower levels of well-being (Suedfeld & Pennebaker, 1997).

Regarding our results, women might have to put in more cognitive effort, such as reliving unwanted experiences and acting quickly under certain situations, which could have adverse health outcomes. Future research could assess the worry and behavioral strategies studied here and measure if specific strategies require more cognitive effort and energy. For instance, based on our findings women devote more time worrying about being followed and behaviorally walk away more often. These tactics maybe taxing and could impact health and well-being more than the other strategies.

This potential aggressive response one may experience when rejecting an unwanted advance can impact one's sexual health. The definition of sexual health encompasses the ability to form and maintain relationships (Edwards & Coleman, 2004); therefore, it is possible that having to reject someone's multiple advances may cause stress and further worry and hinder the forming of future relationships. This decision to reject an unwanted advance is a form of sexual autonomy and part of sexual health's domain, known as "free choice," and is a sexual human right (Coleman et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021). Although women are exercising their sexual right to reject an unwanted advance, the reoccurrence and early exposure of retaliation and threat may have foreseeable impacts on their sexual health and may manifest in the form of dating stress and rejection strategies that we observed.

Additionally, the repercussions of rejection may lead to trauma. For instance, previous work suggests that sexual objectification can lead to insidious trauma—or the psychological impact of low levels of discrimination throughout one's life (Miles-McLean et al., 2015). Recurrent and early exposure to rejecting unwanted advances may also lead to this type of trauma but future research is needed to understand this relationship. Safety has been classified as one of the factors of sexual well-being but the women in our current sample do not perceive safety in these situations; they are reporting being more worried about violence compared to men. Therefore, by using trauma-informed sex-positive approach—which links sexual health to justice—one can develop research studies and interventions that focus on women's safety to increase sexual well health among woman (Fava & Fortenberry, 2021). This approach can increase safety and well-being during dating scenarios for women.

These findings are also useful for educating men on women's safety and perceptions of safety, how their behaviors can be seen as threatening, and how men can minimize their threat, ultimately minimizing re-traumatization (Fava & Fortenberry, 2021). Men can also be educated on women's responses to threats in these contexts so they can properly interpret flirting situations and accurately gauge women's comfort levels. The male sexual over-perception bias (Haselton & Buss, 2000) posits that men are more likely to overestimate women's sexual interest. This effect has long been documented and education based on these findings can help counter that bias and help men understand when to make wanted advances. In terms of sexual education, there is education designed for 6-12th graders to understand the difference between flirting and sexual harassment (Stein & Sjostrom, 1994). Programs like these may lead to a decrease in women having to reject unwanted advances or decrease retaliation once rejection occurs. This education may increase safety for young women and could lead to greater sexual pleasure and well-being (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015; Mark et al., 2021; World Association for Sexual Health [WAS], 2019) which is of interest to young people who are receiving sexual education (Sladden et al., 2021).

Although this research is novel, a major limitation of this study was that it was a retrospective, cross-sectional study, and participants had to recall when they had their first romantic advancements and rejections. A notable area of future research is to compare women's

self-reported worry with various risks they may encounter when navigating the dating market. For instance, under various circumstances worry may be greater (e.g., when out with a group of friends compared to alone). This may strengthen these results because our study assessed worry and behavioral strategies retroactively, it would be beneficial to assess these feeling under different contexts and even momentarily. Demographic differences should also be investigated since the sample was predominantly White and from the northeast United States. For these data to be generalizable, future work is needed to understand how rejection worry and strategies differ across cultures. Previous work suggests that cultures of honor may respond differently to rejection (Leung & Cohen, 2011), therefore, strategies may differ. Lastly, this work should be expanded to populations like women living with HIV who already report high rates of violence (Carter et al., 2018; Sikkema et al., 2009); these women may be vulnerable to greater rates of rejection retaliation. Nonetheless, this study documents that women navigate the dating world more vigilantly to ensure their safety compared to men.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

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