Dealbreakers, or dealbenders? Capturing the cumulative effects of partner information on mate choice☆

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A B S T R A C T

Entering and establishing a long-term relationship is typically a gradual process, as dating partners acquire information about each other over weeks or months. In contrast, existing mate selection paradigms (e.g., lab experiments, speed-dating) typically examine single brief encounters with real or potential mates. In the current research, we used a Choose Your Own Adventure design to examine how potential dealbreakers operate within the context of a broader relationship dynamic. In two studies, a combined total of 1585 participants read a story about a new dating relationship. At each of 17 junctures in the story, participants chose whether to continue dating or end the relationship. Potential dealbreakers were independently manipulated to be present or absent at each juncture, for a total of up to 17 negative pieces of information about the partner. Study 2 was a preregistered replication and extension of Study 1. On average, participants did not reject the hypothetical partner until several potential dealbreakers had been presented ($M = 4.20$ in Study 1, $M = 3.68$ in Study 2). Participants' self-reported dealbreakers consistently aligned with their in-story decisions. Even so, participants tended to encounter at least two of their own personal dealbreakers before choosing to reject (Study 2). Together, these studies highlight the sequential, iterative nature of partner evaluations, and illustrate a novel, accessible method for testing models of early relationship development.

"You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your prince." - Modern American Proverb

Before settling down with a long-term romantic partner, is it generally assumed that people must first reject many unsuitable partners. However, the process by which people conclude that suitors are unsuitable is not well-understood (e.g., see Campbell & Stanton, 2014; Eastwick, Finkel, & Simpson, 2019; Fletcher, Overall, & Campbell, 2020). We propose that an important limitation to most standard mate selection research designs, including hypothetical vignettes, self-reported mate preferences, in-lab confederate studies, and speed-dating paradigms, is that they follow a short time course. Each potential dating partner is presented briefly—be it in-person (e.g., Eastwick, Finkel, & Eagly, 2011; Joel, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2017), as a dating profile (e.g., Joel, Teper, & MacDonald, 2014), or simply as a list of traits (e.g., Buss, 1989; Jonason, Garcia, Webster, Li, & Fisher, 2015)—and assessed at a single point in time. In contrast, partner evaluation processes in the context of real dating relationships unfold over weeks or months, as information about the partner is gradually revealed. Methodological challenges have stymied research on this crucial fledgling

relationship phase (Joel & Eastwick, 2018), with only two studies to date successfully tracking single people over time as they entered and established new relationships (Campbell, Chin, & Stanton, 2016; Gerlach, Arslan, Schultze, Reinhard, & Penke, 2019).

In the present study, we sought to capture the sequential aspect of mate evaluation in an accessible, experimentally controlled way using a Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm (Turan & Vicary, 2010; Vicary & Fraley, 2007). With this paradigm, we asked participants to imagine themselves in a new dating relationship that becomes increasingly committed as the story unfolds. At each juncture, the reader is presented with new information about the partner and the relationship, and must then decide whether to progress with the relationship or leave. Within the story, we separately manipulated the presence or absence of 17 characteristics previously shown to be common potential dealbreakers (e.g., Jonason et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2004). We were then able to explore how people make mate selection choices in response to dealbreaker cues that are embedded within the context of a broader relationship dynamic. Specifically, we tested three questions: 1) To what extent did people reject hypothetical partners in response to different

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kinds of negative information? 2) Did the influence of potential deal-breakers accumulate over the course of the story? And 3) to what extent did self-reported dealbreakers correspond with in-story decisions? In this paper, we present the results of an exploratory Study 1 and a confirmatory Study 2.

1. Dealmakers and dealbreakers: What people do and do not want in a mate

Several prominent theories of human mate choice agree that humans a) form a set of preferences about what kind of romantic partner they would like, b) evaluate potential partners according to those preferences, and then c) arrive at a decision about their own level of romantic interest in each person (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 1999; Miller & Todd, 1998; see Conroy-Beam, 2021 for review). Accordingly, a large body of research has sought to document the specific romantic preferences that people hold. In one seminal dataset, 9474 participants recruited from 33 countries were asked to rank the importance of a large variety of traits for choosing a romantic partner (Buss, 1989; Buss et al., 1990). For both men and women, the most desirable traits largely pertained to warmth (e.g., a dependable character, emotional stability and maturity, a pleasing disposition kindness), social status (e.g., education and intelligence, exciting personality, sociability), and attractiveness (e. g., mutual attraction, healthy, physically attractive). Factors representing characteristics similar to those identified by Buss and colleagues have also been found in other studies (e.g., Csajbók & Berkics, 2017). Most notably, Fletcher and colleagues, using interdependence theory as a foundation (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), have garnered considerable evidence that people evaluate both current and potential romantic partners along these three key dimensions of warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, and status-resources (the Ideal Standards Model; e.g., Fletcher et al., 1999; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2001).

Most research on mate selection to date has focused on desirable traits that people are likely to seek in potential mates. However, recent evidence suggests that negative information about a potential partner (dealbreakers) may loom larger in the mate selection process than positive information (dealmakers). First, humans have limited cognitive resources that are quickly taxed when people are asked to exhaustively search through many mating options (e.g., Lenton & Francesconi, 2010). Additionally, evolutionary pressures favour decision strategies that minimize the occurrence of costly errors (Error Management Theory; Haselton & Buss, 2000). Failing to select the best possible mate is not as costly of an error as winding up with a highly undesirable mate, or worse, no mate at all. For these reasons, humans may prefer "fast and frugal" mate selection strategies that prioritize finding an acceptable partner quickly rather than choosing an ideal partner carefully (Long & Campbell, 2015; Miller & Todd, 1998; Neth, Schächtele, Duwal, & Todd, 2011; Todd, 1997). Instead of exhaustively evaluating every romantic option in search of the *best* partner, a more adaptive approach may be to reject clearly unsuitable partners until a minimally acceptable partner is secured.

Building on this work, Jonason et al. (2015) conducted a series of studies on dealbreakers: the traits that people are most motivated to avoid in potential mates. A sample of 92 undergraduates was asked to list their personal dealbreakers in the context of both short-term and long-term relationships. Their responses were converted into 49 items, which were administered to a sample of 285 participants. The list was further refined into 17 dealbreakers, which was then administered to a representative sample of 5541 single Americans. The most common dealbreakers for a committed long-term relationship included having a disheveled or unclean appearance, laziness, neediness, a lack of sense of humor, and living too far away. Men and women largely agreed on which traits were dealbreakers. However, women reported a greater total number of dealbreakers than men, consistent with the idea that women are romantically choosier than men (Buss & Schmitt, 1993;

Fletcher, Kerr, Li, & Valentine, 2014).

2. How do people actually choose—and reject—dating partners?

Despite the extensive literature on mate preferences that people hold, studying how people actually select long-term partners has proved to be methodologically challenging, and results vary considerably depending on what method is used (see Campbell & Stanton, 2014; Eastwick et al., 2019; Fletcher et al., 2020 for discussion). In the context of established relationships, people's stated mate preferences tend to correlate with the actual traits of their current romantic partners, and discrepancies between the two are in turn linked to lower relationship satisfaction (e.g., Campbell, Overall, Rubin, & Lackenbauer, 2013; Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999) and relationship regulation attempts (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006). However, there are plausible alternative explanations for these associations, such as the possibility that people's ideals change over time to match their partners, or that people's personalities change over time to match their partners' ideals, particularly in more satisfying relationships (see Eastwick et al., 2019 for discussion). Computational modelling of both simulated and real couples has suggested that people may select romantic partners based on their Euclidean distance away from one's ideals (Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2016, 2017). Some laboratory experiments with trained actors have suggested that people do not adhere to their stated dating standards when presented with real dating opportunities (e.g., Eastwick et al., 2011; Slotter & Gardner, 2012). Similarly, several speed-dating studies have found that preferences do not predict initial romantic interest (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Joel et al., 2017; Kurzban & Weeden, 2005, 2007; Todd, Penke, Fasolo, & Lenton, 2007; although see Li et al., 2013 for an exception).

Longitudinal studies that track new relationships as they form arguably provide the most direct insight into how people ultimately choose long-term romantic partners (Campbell & Stanton, 2014; Joel & Eastwick, 2018). However, such studies are exceedingly difficult to conduct, and to date, only two such studies have been published to our knowledge (Campbell et al., 2016; Gerlach et al., 2019). In both cases, single individuals were tracked over five months as they transitioned into romantic relationships. Participants' self-reported ideal standards at Time 1—when they were still single—prospectively predicted their perceptions of their partners' personalities ($N = 258$ participants, Gerlach et al., 2019), and their partner's own reports of their personalities five months later ($N = 38$ dyads, Campbell et al., 2016). Both studies focused on traits that people desire in mates (ideal standards, or dealmakers), rather than traits that people avoid in mates (dealbreakers).

Only one study that we know of has explicitly examined how dealbreakers influence mate choices (Study 2 of Joel et al., 2014). In this experiment, undergraduate participants were given a list of traits at the beginning of the semester (e.g., "drinks often", "doesn't drink at all", "is very religious", "is an atheist"), and asked to indicate if they would ever consider dating a person who possessed each trait (Joel et al., 2014). Later in the semester, participants were brought into the lab and shown several dating profiles. After participants selected their favorite profile, they were shown additional information about that profile that was tailored to include up to three of the participant's previously selected dealbreakers. Among those asked to imagine the scenario hypothetically, 46% predicted that they would agree to exchange contact information with the incompatible date. Among those who were told that the scenario was real, 74% agreed to exchange contact information. These results suggest that self-reported dealbreakers may be largely ignored, at least among Canadian undergraduate students choosing whether to make an initial romantic overture.

3. Modelling the time course of mate choice

In sum, our understanding of how people decide to reject unsuitable potential partners is largely based on one-time assessments of romantic

interest, such as self-reported dealbreakers (e.g., Jonason et al., 2015), ratings of dating profiles (Joel et al., 2014), or desire for speed-dating partners (Joel et al., 2017; Kurzban & Weeden, 2005, 2007). However, in real life, partners get to know each other gradually. Couples often meet within their existing social circles, meaning that they may know each other for months or even years before they begin officially dating (Eastwick, Keneski, Morgan, McDonald, & Huang, 2018; Hunt, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2015). Then, couples typically date for many months before marriage, at least in modern Western culture. As new dating partners spend more time together in different situations, they gain insight into each other's positive and negative qualities, which they use to decide whether to invest further time and energy in one another. Many negative qualities in particular may reveal themselves not in a dating profile or during an initial four-minute encounter, but on a second, third, fifth, tenth, or twentieth date (Eastwick et al., 2018). In the time that it takes to uncover this information, partners are also becoming increasingly attached to one another (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Heffernan, Fraley, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2012), and making tangible and intangible investments into the relationship (e.g., self-disclosures, future plans, integrated social networks; Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008), all of which may increase the barriers to ending the relationship (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult, 1980, 1983).

We believe that the logistical difficulties of tracking new relationships as they develop have constrained our field's ability to develop and test hypotheses about the iterative nature of mate selection processes. The fledgling phase of a romantic relationship, when partners are theorized to learn the most about one another, is fleeting and difficult to capture empirically (Joel & Eastwick, 2018). These feasibility concerns often leave relationship researchers with the options of a) studying established couples and trying to make backward inferences about how the partners first selected each other, or b) studying initial romantic attraction and trying to make forward inferences about whether real relationships will develop. As a result, the processes by which people repeatedly learn and integrate information about brand-new dating partners are not well-understood. We need more inexpensive, lab-based methods for testing hypotheses and building models of early relationship processes.

In 2007, Vicary and Fraley proposed the Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm as a new method for studying relationship decisions. With this design, readers are presented with a story about a romantic relationship that gradually unfolds. Participants imagine themselves as the protagonist in the story and, at several junctures, are asked to make decisions about what to do within the story. The story is structured so that participants believe (correctly or incorrectly, depending on the design) that their decisions will influence what happens next within the story.

The authors argued that this structure is better for studying nuanced relationship dynamics than static hypothetical scenarios, for several reasons. First, the design allows the researcher to capture iterative decision-making processes (see also Freedman, Seidman, Flanagan, Green, & Kaufman, 2018). How does the new information that participants receive at each juncture alter how they make subsequent choices, and how does the impact of that information accumulate over time? Second, the story format is immersive and therefore more realistic for the participants, particularly when they believe that their decisions will influence subsequent events within the story. This immersive quality also allows the researcher to include, and even independently manipulate, more decision-relevant information before participants disengage from the task. To date, the Choose Your Own Adventure design has been used to examine attachment dynamics in the context of established relationships (Turan & Vicary, 2010; Vicary & Fraley, 2007), but it has not been used to study early relationship development. Given the limitations of studying ongoing relationship development in the lab and the challenges of monitoring early dating behaviors in the wild, this unique paradigm presents a novel way of assessing the natural progression of fledgling relationships in a controlled setting.

4. Present research

In the present research, we used the Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm to examine how people respond to potential dealbreakers in the context of fledgling romantic relationships. Specifically, we explored three related research questions. First, to what extent do people reject hypothetical partners in response to potential dealbreakers, compared to positive versions of the same information? This research question is essentially a manipulation check, intended to probe the internal validity of the paradigm. If participants are more likely to reject the dating partner in response to negative versions of each scenario rather than positive, that suggests that participants are indeed reading and interpreting the relationship story as intended. Second, does the influence of potential dealbreakers accumulate over the course of the story? If participants incorporate the information they receive earlier in the story into later decisions, that suggests that the paradigm is successfully capturing an iterative aspect of mate choice that is typically missed within the mate selection literature. Finally, to what extent do participants' self-reported dealbreakers correspond with the decisions they make within the context of the story? The answer to this question will provide new evidence for or against the idea that people have insight into their own dating preferences, particularly when preference-relevant information is embedded within the context of a broader relationship dynamic.

Study 1 was an exploratory study in which we presented the Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm to 1181 eligible participants. Study 2 was a confirmatory study and near-direct replication of Study 1, with some design changes intended to mitigate potential limitations of Study 1.

5. Study 1

In Study 1, participants progressed through a hypothetical dating relationship over 17 scenarios, beginning with a blind date and concluding with the couple discussing moving in together. In each scenario, participants were presented with new information about the partner that was randomly assigned to be either positive or negative (i. e., a potential dealbreaker). After each scenario, participants were faced with the decision to continue dating the person or end the relationship. This within-person design provides considerable statistical power to examine the effect of each independently manipulated dealbreaker, as well as potential cumulative effects of the dealbreakers on participants' decision making.

The study's recruitment approach and analysis plan were preregistered on July 14, 2020 (https://osf.io/axtmg). The preregistered analyses concerned an experimental manipulation in which participants were asked to imagine the story from either their own or a hypothetical friend's perspective. We had predicted that participants would be particularly choosy when evaluating a friend's relationship, consistent with data suggesting that people are less optimistic about others' relationships compared to their own (e.g., MacDonald & Ross, 1999). However, the experimental manipulation produced weak and inconsistent effects; See Supplemental File. The key analyses presented were not preregistered and can be considered exploratory. All measures, manipulations, and exclusions are reported below. De-identified data, materials, and code for the study can be found at https://osf.io/s4zrj/.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants

We preregistered that we would recruit a total of 500 participants via university listservs as well as Prolific. We planned to include participants in analyses only if they spoke English fluently, resided within the US or Canada, were at least 18 years of age, and passed all attention checks. We planned to cease recruitment once a total of 500 participants had completed the questionnaire.

The study was posted on Western University's Mass Email Recruitment listserv on September 30, 2020, in exchange for entry into a draw for one of three $50 Amazon gift cards. We ceased recruitment after one week, as 1536 participants had begun the study and 1355 participants had completed the study, which exceeded our target N. We chose to cease recruitment before viewing or analyzing the data. We excluded 174 participants according to our stated exclusion criteria. Specifically, we excluded participants because they indicated that they either were not yet 18 years of age ($n = 54$), were not fluent in English ($n = 6$), resided outside of North America ($n = 21$), did not respond honestly ($n = 3$), or because they failed our attention check ($n = 90$). The final sample was 1181 participants (319 men, 843 women, 18 nonbinary, one did not disclose) with a mean age of 22 years old ($SD = 5.09$, $range = 18$ to 69); 76% of participants identified as straight ($n = 900$), 3% identified as gay or lesbian ($n = 39$), 16% identified as bisexual ($n = 194$), and 4% wrote in a different label. The sample was 59% white ($n = 697$), 22% Asian ($n = 264$), 6% multiple ethnicities ($n = 76$), 4% East Indian ($n = 43$), 3% otherwise identified ($n = 33$), 3% Middle Eastern ($n = 31$), 2% Hispanic ($n = 20$), 1% Black ($n = 13$), and less than 1% Native American/First Nations ($n = 1$) or non-disclosing ($n = 3$).

5.2. Procedure and measures

At the onset of the study, participants were randomly assigned to read a story in which either they (self condition) or a hypothetical friend (friend condition) would be in a new romantic relationship. All participants were told that they would view a Choose Your Own Adventure story in which they would read a series of scenarios, each ending with the option to end or continue the relationship. The self condition was written such that participants made decisions for themselves and the friend condition was written such that participants provided advice that would determine their friend's decision. Participants were asked to make decisions as if they or their friend were really in the relationship and were told that they would be given the option to view the other scenarios after the story was over to ensure that no one continued the relationship just to see what would happen. Participants in the self condition chose whether they wanted to date a man (Ben) or woman (Jess) and those in the friend condition chose to have a male or female friend (a male friend Ben dating Jess or a female friend Jess dating Ben). The story then began with participants being informed that they or their friend had been single for some time but that a friend had just set them up with a blind date. Participants then proceeded to the first scenario and manipulation. When the paradigm ended, either because the participant chose to leave early or stay until the end, participants read a scene in which the couple broke up amicably.

5.2.1. Dealbreaker manipulations

A total of 17 potential dealbreakers were selected based on the partner preferences literature (e.g., Jonason et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2004). A pilot sample of undergraduate students ($N = 175$) rated each possible dealbreaker from very unlikely to be a dealbreaker (1) to very likely to be a dealbreaker (5). These dealbreakers were then converted into iterative relationship scenarios. For each scenario, participants were randomly assigned to receive either the negative version of the scenario (e.g., learning that the hypothetical romantic partner is physically unattractive), or a positive version of the same scenario (e.g., learning that the partner is attractive). The ordering of the dealbreakers in the present study was based on the pilot ratings, with less severe dealbreakers placed earlier in the story, while also maintaining the story's narrative flow. For example, unattractiveness was rated 4th least likely to be a dealbreaker by the pilot sample. However, unattractiveness is the first scenario presented, as it would not be logical for someone to only notice how attractive their new partner was after four interactions. The 17 dealbreakers, along with their pilot-rated likelihoods of being dealbreakers, are presented in the order in which they appeared in the story in Table 1.

Table 1
Study 1 Dealbreaker Scenarios.

Scenario	Topic	Mean Pilot-Rated Importance (SD)	Snippets from Scenarios	
			Negative Version	Positive Version
1	Attractiveness	3.33 (1.09)	She's around your height, less attractive than you were expecting, and a touch disheveled, but seems friendly.	She's attractive, dressed nicely, and seems friendly.
2	Long-distance	3.16 (1.17)	"Oh, I work remotely. I actually live a couple hours outside of town, and I only come into the office once every week or so."	"Tom's great, too, 'cause we both live in the center of town, so he sometimes gives me rides."
3	Self-confidence	3.15 (1.12)	"I don't know, I've been taking a class on screen printing lately, and it's pretty cool," she says, shyly. "I'm really not that good, though." Her voice seems sad and somewhat embarrassed.	"Yeah, actually! I've recently been taking this screen printing class, and it's really cool!" You ask her if she has any photos and she immediately takes out her phone. "Check 'em out," she says.
4	Religious beliefs	3.01 (1.30)	"Oh, okay. I don't want to make this a thing, but I do want you to know that I disagree with you."	"I saw those posts you made on Instagram last night about religion. I just wanted to say I really agree with you."
5	Political Orientation	3.46 (1.28)	She's not sure who she's voting for yet, except she definitely won't be supporting that awful Eric Williamson. You clench your teeth into a smile – you just donated $25 to Williamson's campaign.	She's not sure who she's voting for yet, except she definitely won't be supporting that awful Eric Williamson. You smile – you just donated $25 to Williamson's opponent's campaign.
6	Laziness	3.85 (1.03)	"Wow," you say, "You watch a lot of TV." "Yeah – that's basically all I do when I get home," she says.	"Honestly, I just don't watch much TV. I'd rather be out doing stuff, or spending time with people. TV makes me feel lazy."
7	Sex drive	3.43 (1.16)	"Sorry," she mutters, "I guess I should have brought	"Sorry," she mutters, pulling back, "Is this okay? I

Table 1 (*continued*)

Scenario	Topic	Mean Pilot-Rated Importance (*SD*)	Snippets from Scenarios	
			Negative Version	Positive Version
8	Income	3.67(*1.25*)	this up sooner, but I have a pretty low sex drive." "But things have been tight at my organization, and I got reduced to part-time hours at work last month. I've had to dip into my savings quite a bit."	don't want to do anything you're not comfortable with." "Turns out I've been misreading the situation with the higher ups. I actually got a promotion yesterday. And let's just say that the pay increase is, um, substantial."
9	Children	3.74(*1.18*)	"I know people change their minds and all that, I don't know, but I'm not really on the same page as you."	"We're just getting to know each other, so obviously this doesn't mean anything, but I'm on the exact same page as you when it comes to kids."
10	Alcohol use	4.18(*1.09*)	"Oh, yeah," Jess says casually, "I have a bit of an alcohol problem, but I'm working on it."	"It's not a big deal. It's not like I'm a huge drinker anyways." Jess says, brushing it off.
11	Receptiveness to interests	4.27(*0.94*)	"That's cool," Jess says, but doesn't inquire further.	"That's cool!" Jess says. "Tell me more!"
12	Dependability	4.30(*0.91*)	"Oh shoot, right. I'll be there in half an hour. My bad." She doesn't seem especially sorry, but you thank her and text Matt the update.	"You and your brother are more important. I got this. Just let me know when I should get him."
13	Sense of humor	4.31(*0.95*)	"We went to see that new comedy, the one everyone's been raving about?" Matt nods. "Well, it's pretty good. I really enjoyed myself, but Jess *hated* it."	"We went to see that new comedy, the one everyone's been raving about?" Matt nods. "Well, it's not good, I don't get the hype. Jess and I didn't laugh at any of the jokes."
14	Hygiene	4.36(*0.97*)	You don't want to be rude, but she doesn't smell great.	Jess smells quite nice. Come to think of it, you've never known Jess to *not* smell nice.
15	Trustworthiness	4.74(*0.67*)	Then she bursts into tears. She	"Thank you for trusting me,"

Table 1 (*continued*)

Scenario	Topic	Mean Pilot-Rated Importance (*SD*)	Snippets from Scenarios	
			Negative Version	Positive Version
16	Exclusivity	4.51(*0.98*)	says she's sorry. She says she'll never lie to you again. "I'm still seeing Steve. I thought I made that clear."	You say when she's finished. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that. "I want to be exclusive with you, too. And if we have feelings for other people, or anything like that, let's be open and honest and talk with each other about that, okay?"
17	Anger issues	4.45(*0.94*)	"I haven't finished with you! Get back here now!" You stop cold. "Don't you dare walk away from me!"	"No, no – nothing to be sorry for." She takes your hand and looks at you with an expression full of affection and concern. "Are we good?"

Note. Full scenarios may be viewed at https://osf.io/s4zrj/.

5.2.2. Stay/leave decisions

After each scenario, participants were presented with the options of continuing with the relationship (stay) or ending the relationship (leave). Stay and leave options narratively flowed with each scenario; for example, "You reply, 'Sure!' and give her your phone number. She's worth getting to know a bit better" would continue the relationship and, "You reply, 'Sure,' but don't give her your phone number. She gives you hers, but you won't be calling" would end it.

5.2.3. Self-reported dealbreakers

The 17 dealbreakers presented in the pilot were also shown to participants in the present study, after they completed the Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm. We defined dealbreakers for participants as they were defined in Study 2 of Jonason et al. (2015): "Deal-breakers are bits of information you learn about a person that might make you lose interest in a potential partner". Dealbreakers were rated from very unlikely to be a dealbreaker (1) to very likely to be a dealbreaker (5). Example dealbreakers include, "Unattractive," "Lazy," and "Poor hygiene."

Finally, participants completed a demographics questionnaire, and were debriefed.

5.3. Results

5.3.1. Descriptive information

On average, participants progressed through 7.41 scenarios (*median* = 6, *SD* = 2.13, *range* = 0[1] to 17), and were presented with an average of 4.20 potential dealbreakers before choosing to reject the hypothetical dating partner (*median* = 4, *SD* = 2.13, *range* = 0 to 12). Fig. 1 visualizes

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[1] Note that a 0 on this scale represents participants who rejected the hypothetical partner in response to the first scenario (i.e., they did not successfully progress through any scenarios), whereas a 17 represents participants who never rejected the partner.
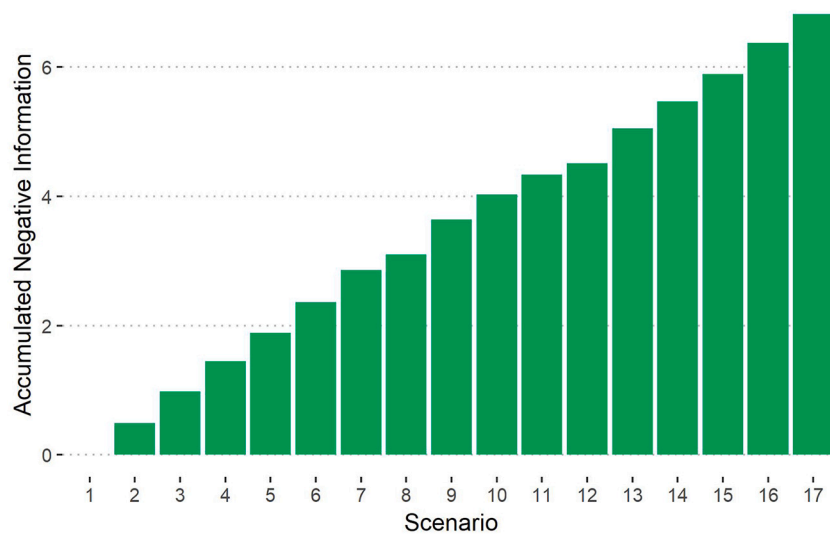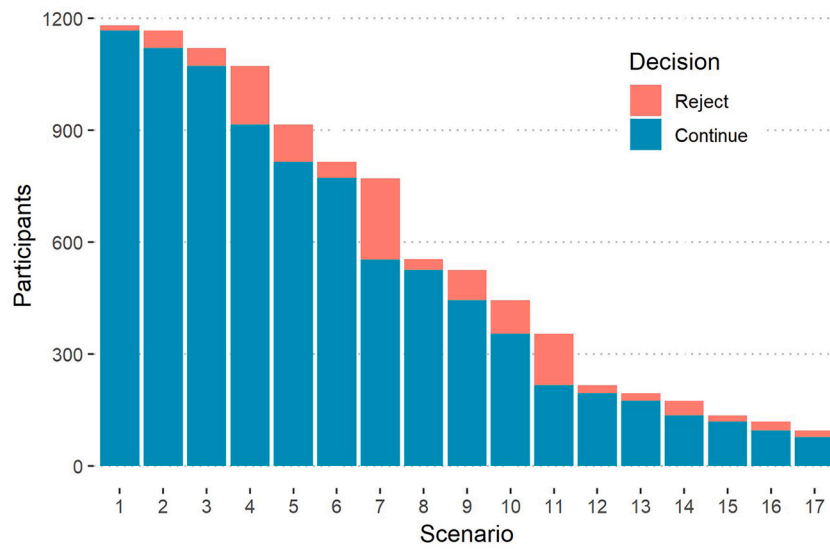
Fig. 1. Participants' Progress Through the Story as Negative Information Accumulated.
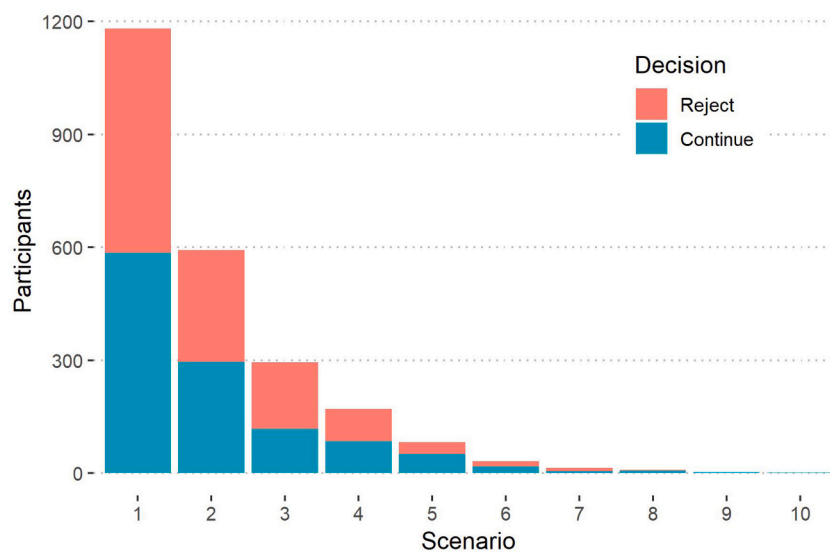

Fig. 2. Hypothetical Progress Through the Story if Participants Treated the First Piece of Negative Information Encountered as a Dealbreaker.

participants' progress through the story as negative information about the dating partner accumulated. For comparison, we also plotted what story progress would have looked like had every participant rejected the partner in response to the first piece of negative information they received: see Fig. 2.

These results suggest that the negative pieces of information presented within the story did not tend to function as dealbreakers in an absolute sense. Rather than exiting the story in response to the first potential dealbreaker encountered, participants generally chose to progress through the story and acquire more information about the partner before rejecting them.

5.4. Did people reject hypothetical partners in response to negative information?

Were participants more likely to reject the hypothetical dating partner in response to negative information about the dating partner, compared to more positive versions of the same scenarios? We tested this question using discrete-time hazard models, which model the risk of an outcome occurring; in this case, the risk of the hypothetical relationship ending in response to a given scenario. Data were organized at the level of the scenario, such that each participant had up to 17 rows of data. Whether participants received potential dealbreaker information within a given scenario was represented by a "scenario information" variable (0 = positive, 1 = negative). The decision of whether to continue versus end the relationship in response to a given scenario was represented by a "decision" variable (0 = continue, 1 = reject). As suggested by Singer and Willett (2003), we conducted these models using logistic regression (via the glm function in R), with discrete time represented by a series of dummy predictors.[2] Specifically, by entering scenario number as a factor variable into the model, R generated a total of 16 dummy predictors that represented which scenario participants were deciding on at a given time point, with Scenario 1 as the default scenario.

We first tested a model in which scenario (representing Scenarios 2 through 17 as separate dummy variables) and scenario information (positive versus negative) were entered as predictors. Indeed, participants were more likely to end a given scenario if it contained negative information about the hypothetical partner rather than positive, $b = 2.17$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$. In comparison to the first scenario presented, participants were significantly more likely end the story in response to each of the other 16 scenarios, all $bs > 1.20$, $ps < 0.001$. These results may reflect a general pattern of participants being increasingly likely to end the relationship as the story progressed.

We also tested a model in which participants' own relationship status, participants' age, and the gender of the hypothetical partner were all entered as control variables. In this model, information remained a significant predictor of the choice to reject the hypothetical partner, $b = 2.19$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$. The target's gender was also a significant predictor. Participants were less likely to end the relationship when the target was a woman rather than a man, $b = -0.55$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$, and as most participants who chose to date a woman identified as men, this finding is consistent with research suggesting that women are choosier than men when selecting mates (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Fletcher et al., 2014). The age and relationship status of the participant were not significant predictors of their general tendency to end the hypothetical relationships, $bs < 0.01$, $ps > 0.70$.

We next examined whether participants' tendency to reject the

partner in response to negative information depended on the particular scenario being presented. Interaction terms were added between information (0 = positive, 1 = negative) and scenario number (capturing Scenarios 2 through 17). We plotted the results using the cat_plot function from the interactions package (Long, 2021); see Fig. 3. Of the 16 interactions tested, four were statistically significant. These interactions suggest that, over and above the main effect of scenario information, participants' decisions were particularly shaped by which version of the scenario they received when the scenario pertained to political beliefs (Scenario 5; $b = 1.92$, $SE = 0.83$, $p = .02$), alcohol use (Scenario 10; $b = 3.07$, $SE = 0.98$, $p = .002$), receptiveness to interests (Scenario 11; $b = 2.24$, $SE = 0.75$, $p = .003$), and exclusivity (Scenario 16; $b = 2.43$, $SE = 1.23$, $p = .05$).

5.5. Did the influence of potential dealbreakers accumulate over time?

Does negative information about a hypothetical dating partner have a cumulative effect, such that each piece of negative information is more likely to function as a dealbreaker than the last? To find out, we calculated an "accumulated dealbreakers" variable by tallying the number of negative information scenarios each participant had received by the time they reached a given scenario. For example, if Andy was randomly assigned to receive negative information about Jess on Scenarios 1, 4, and 5, then he would have an accumulated dealbreakers score of 0 on Scenario 1, 1 on Scenarios 2–4, 2 on Scenario 5, and 3 on Scenario 6.

We tested this with a discrete-time hazard model using logistic regression, as above. Scenario number (represented as 16 dummy variables), information received on the current scenario (0 = positive, 1 = negative), and accumulated dealbreakers (uncentered) were entered as predictors, with choice (0 = continue, 1 = reject) as the outcome variable. Indeed, and over and above the kind of information was presented in the current scenario, participants were more likely to reject the hypothetical dating partner if they had received a greater number of pieces of negative information about the partner up to that point in the story, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$. The cumulative effect of dealbreakers also held over and above participant relationship status, participant age, and target gender, $b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$.

5.6. Did self-reported dealbreakers correspond with in-story decisions?

To what extent did people choose to reject the hypothetical partner in accordance with their self-reported dealbreakers? Recall that at the end of the story, participants were given a list of negative characteristics (e.g., "unattractiveness", "lacks self-confidence") and asked to rate the extent to which each item was a personal dealbreaker for them. We scored these items in two ways. First, we averaged all 17 items and grand-mean-centered them ("overall choosiness"). This Level 2 variable represented how choosy each participant claimed to be overall, relative to the other participants. Second, we paired each item with its corresponding scenario and person-centered them ("scenario-specific choosiness"). This Level 1 variable represented the extent to which a negative characteristic was purported to be a particularly strong dealbreaker for the participant relative to the other characteristics.

We again conducted a series of discrete-time hazard models with choice (0 = continue, 1 = reject) as the outcome variable. Results are shown in Table 2. As shown in Model 1, participants who purported to have more dealbreakers overall were significantly more likely to reject the partner at any given point in the story. As shown in Model 2, participants were also significantly more likely to reject a partner in response to scenarios pertaining to topics that were particularly strong dealbreakers for them. Most importantly, Model 3 shows that the impact of scenario-specific choosiness on rejection decisions was moderated by whether participants received the negative versus positive version of the scenario. Specifically, participants were particularly likely to reject the dating partner in response to negative information about a topic that

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[2] As described by Singer and Willett (2003), structuring the models this way appropriately accounts for the nested structure of the data (scenarios nested within participants) without the need for multilevel modelling. Within our code, we show for the first model that this approach produces identical results to those obtained using mixed effects logistic regression (with the glmer function within the lme4 package; Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015).
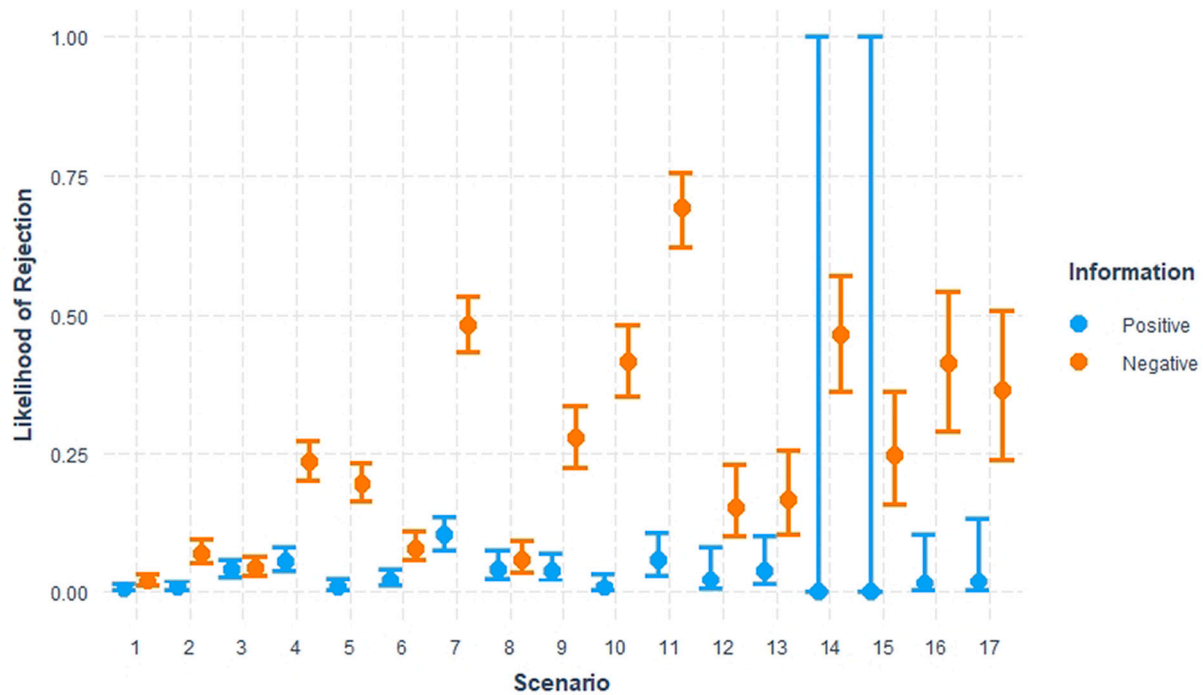
Fig. 3. Impact of Negative Relational Information on Rejection Decisions Over the Course of the Story.
Note. The large error bars for the positive versions of Scenarios 14 and 15 are due to empty cells (no participants chose to exit the story in these conditions).

Table 2
Impact of Negative Relational Information on Rejection Decisions as a Function of Self-Reported Dealbreakers.

	Decision (0 = Continue, 1 = Reject)		
	b	SE	p
Model 1			
Overall choosiness	0.77	0.08	< 0.001
Model 2			
Scenario-specific choosiness	0.94	0.04	< 0.001
Model 3			
Information (0 = positive, 1 = negative)	1.82	0.10	< 0.001
Scenario-specific choosiness	0.30	0.08	< 0.001
Information*Choosiness	0.87	,09	< 0.001
Choosiness at + 1 SD (stronger dealbreaker)			
Information	2.75	0.12	< 0.001
Choosiness at − 1 SD (weaker dealbreaker)			
Information	0.90	0.16	< 0.001

Note: Each model also included 16 dummy-coded predictors representing scenario number (not shown).

was a particularly strong dealbreaker for them; see Fig. 4.

5.7. Did participants make different decisions for themselves versus for a friend?

Recall that participants were randomly assigned to imagine that the story was happening either to themselves or to a hypothetical friend. All analyses concerning this manipulation can be found in the Supplemental File. We had predicted that participants would be less choosy when evaluating the relationship from their own perspective compared to a friend's. However, this hypothesis was not supported. Generally, the self versus friend manipulation exerted weak effects on participants' decisions. All effects reported above emerged regardless of whether participants were imagining themselves versus a friend as the protagonist of the story. When moderations did emerge, they were in the opposite direction to what we predicted: if anything, participants were choosier

when making decisions for themselves compared to a friend.

5.8. Study 1 Discussion

This study implemented a Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm to examine how people respond to potential dealbreakers when they are presented iteratively and within the context of a relationship narrative. Each piece of negative relational information (17 in total) was randomly assigned to be present or absent. This experimental manipulation had a significant effect on participants' decisions, such that people were more likely to reject the hypothetical partner in response to the negative rather than positive versions of each scenario. These results suggest that participants were interpreting the relationship story—and the manipulated information about the potential partner—as intended.

We also found that the influence of potential dealbreakers accumulated over the course of the story. Participants were more likely to reject the partner on a given scenario if they had received more negative information about the partner up to that point, regardless of whether the present scenario contained negative information or not. Not only was the story sufficiently immersive for earlier events to shape people's interpretation of later ones, but the paradigm was also able to capture a novel, iterative aspect of mate choice that is missed by static scenarios. A single potential dealbreaker, in isolation, was often not sufficient for participants to choose to reject the romantic partner. Rather, participants did not reject the partner until an average of four negative pieces of information had been presented. These findings give us a glimpse into how people might gradually acquire information about potential partners and integrate it into an overall assessment of whether the relationship is worth continuing. There is value in revealing mate-selection-relevant information gradually, in a way that more realistically captures how people learn about new romantic partners while still retaining experimental control.

Participants' decisions within the story were in line with self-reported dealbreaker ratings. Participants were particularly likely to reject a partner in response to negative information that was a severe dealbreaker for them, suggesting that people have some degree of insight into their own personal dealbreakers. Finally, the same pattern of
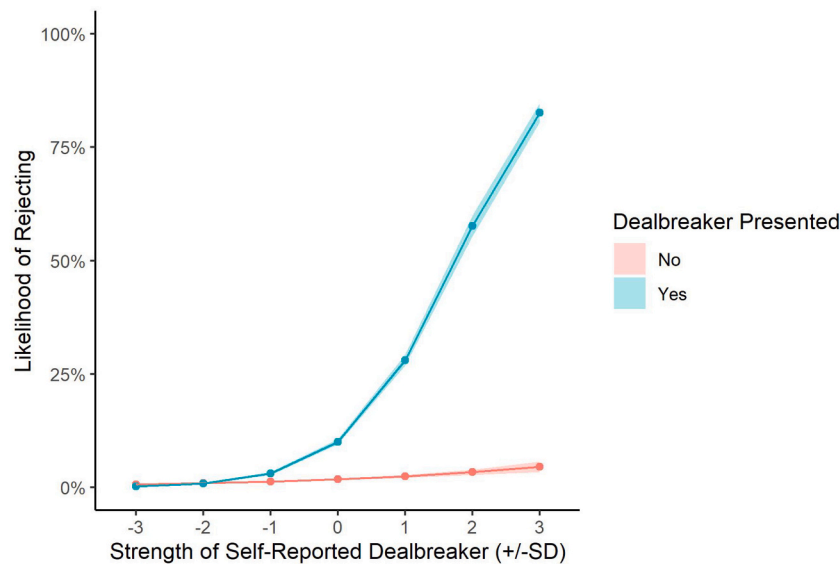
Fig. 4. Strength of Self-Reported Dealbreakers Moderates Impact of Presenting Negative Information on Decision to Reject.

results emerged regardless of whether participants were imagining the story happening to themselves or a friend. It is possible that participants in the friend condition simply put themselves in the friend's shoes, leading to a highly similar experience as the self condition. Future research may attempt to strengthen this manipulation, for example, by first asking the participant to imagine a specific friend in detail.

6. Study 2

Study 2 was a replication and extension of Study 1. The study followed the same protocol used in Study 1, but with three key design changes intended to overcome potential flaws in the original design.

First, in Study 1, the potential dealbreakers were loosely presented in their order of severity, with less severe dealbreakers occurring earlier in the story. We designed the study this way in part to maximize the amount of overall data we would receive, and in part to enhance the realism of the story (more severe dealbreakers tend to reveal themselves later in relationships). However, this design necessarily confounds dealbreaker severity with the number of dealbreakers that participants have received thus far. To de-confound these variables in Study 2, we rearranged the order of the scenarios such that the severity of a given potential dealbreaker (based on Study 1 data) was uncorrelated with where it appeared in the story. We did this by moving some of the more severe dealbreakers earlier in the story (e.g., hygiene, exclusivity), and by moving some less severe dealbreakers later in the story (e.g., political beliefs, religious beliefs).

Second, Study 1 participants were asked to rate their own dealbreakers immediately following the story. Given that people generally value internal consistency (Festinger, 1957), participants may have been reluctant to self-report that a given trait was not a dealbreaker for them when they had just rejected a hypothetical partner for that reason, or that a trait *was* a dealbreaker for them when they had just chosen to remain in a relationship with a person with that characteristic. In Study 2, we created psychological distance between these measures by collecting dealbreaker ratings separately from the story decisions. Specifically, we first recruited participants on Prolific to fill out a brief questionnaire that included the dealbreaker items, embedded within several other filler measures. We then invited these participants back at least two weeks later to complete the Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm.

Finally, Study 1 participants were asked to rate the dealbreaker traits on a 1–5 Likert scale (*1* = very unlikely to be a dealbreaker, *5* = very

likely to be a dealbreaker). Although this continuous measure affords greater statistical sensitivity than a dichotomous one, it does not directly capture whether a participant considers a given trait to be, categorically, a dealbreaker. That is, these items measure how severe participants perceive each relationship problem it be, but not the participants' forecasted stay/leave decisions in response to each one. In Study 2, we instead measured dealbreakers in a forced choice format, by asking participants to select their dealbreakers from a list. This measure allowed us to more directly test whether people's self-reported dealbreakers are treated as such in the context of a story about a new relationship.

Study 2 was preregistered on October 14, 2021 at https://osf.io/kjvz9. De-identified data, materials, and code can be found at https://osf.io/q47wj.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants and procedure

We conducted simulated power analyses (Lane & Hennes, 2018) in which we simulated datasets structured as in Study 1, with properties (e. g., variables, effect sizes) resembling the least sensitive model reported in Study 1 (the scenario-specific choosiness*information interaction predicting rejection decisions, presented in Table 2). In a simulation in which participants progressed through an average of 7 scenarios (same as in Study 1), results suggested that a sample of 200 participants would provide 98% power to detect an interaction effect of the size obtained in Study 1. However, given that some of the more severe dealbreakers will be presented earlier in the story in Study 2, we expect that participants will progress through fewer scenarios on average, reducing power. Further simulations suggested that a sample size of 400 provide 99% power to detect the interaction effect with an average of 6 scenarios completed, 90% power to detect an effect with fewer than 5 scenarios completed, and 85% power to detect an effect with fewer than 4 scenarios completed. Therefore, we planned to cease recruitment once 400 eligible participants had completed the study. Code for the power analysis is available at https://osf.io/q47wj/.

Participants were initially recruited on Prolific to complete a brief background questionnaire that also served as a screening tool to ensure that participants meet eligibility criteria, in exchange for £0.70. Participants who met eligibility criteria in the screening questionnaire were invited to complete the main questionnaire in exchange for £2.25.

A total of 509 participants completed the prescreening survey, and

452 participants completed the main survey. Of those participants, a total of 421 participants could be matched across both timepoints (the remainder either completed only one of two surveys or did not provide their Prolific IDs). We excluded 17 participants according to our pre-registered exclusion criteria: two because they were younger than 18, and 15 participants because they failed at least one of the two attention checks. The final Study 2 sample included 404 participants (214 women, 183 men, 7 non-binary) with a mean age of 30 years old (*SD* = 10.07, *range* = 18 to 72); 77% identified as heterosexual (*n* = 313), 6% identified as gay or lesbian (*n* = 25), 12% identified as bisexual (*n* = 50), and 4% wrote in a different label. The sample was 58% white (*n* = 234), 19% Asian (*n* = 75), 7% Hispanic (*n* = 27), 7% multiple ethnicities (*n* = 27), 5% Black (*n* = 19), 2% Middle Eastern (*n* = 9), 1% East Indian (*n* = 5), and less than 1% Native American/First Nations (*n* = 1). Two percent wrote in a label (*n* = 7).

6.2. Screening measures

6.2.1. Self-reported dealbreakers

We measured dealbreakers in two ways. We first defined deal-breakers for our participants, adapted from Study 1 of Jonason et al., 2015, as "information that would make you reject someone as a potential long-term, committed partner". We then presented participants with a forced choice measure used in Study 3 of Jonason et al., 2015: "When considering a committed relationship with someone, which of the following would be dealbreakers to you? (select all that apply)." The 17 potential dealbreakers presented in Study 1 were again presented to participants in Study 2, in the form of a checklist. Additionally, we measured self-reported dealbreakers continuously for comparison purposes, using the same items and scale anchors that were administered in Study 1.

6.2.2. Eligibility questions

Participants were asked to indicate their age, whether they were fluent in English, and whether they lived in the United States or Canada.

6.3. Choose your own adventure measures

Participants who met eligibility criteria in the screening questionnaire were invited to complete the main questionnaire, which consisted of the Choose Your Own Adventure Paradigm. As in Study 1, participants were asked to choose the gender of their hypothetical partner (Study 2 did not include a friend condition). Participants were told about the nature of the Choose Your Own Adventure story, that they would have the option to stay or leave after each scenario, and that they would be able to view all the scenarios after the adventure is over. After either leaving early or staying until the end, participants read a brief final scene in which the couple amicably breaks up.

6.3.1. Dealbreaker manipulations

We used the same 17 potential dealbreakers from Study 1. For each scenario, participants were again randomly assigned to receive either the negative version of the scenario (e.g., learning that the hypothetical romantic partner is physically unattractive), or a positive version of the same scenario (e.g., learning that the partner is attractive). In the current study, the order of the dealbreakers was rearranged such that scenario number (1 through 17) was uncorrelated with mean dealbreaker severity ratings from Study 1 (*r* = −0.03). Table 3 displays the 17 dealbreakers in the order in which they appear in the story, along with their ratings from Study 1. Note that some scenario content was changed in Study 2 to ensure that the narrative remained logical.

6.3.2. Stay/leave decisions

After each scenario, participants were presented with the options of continuing with the relationship (stay) or ending the relationship (leave). Stay and leave options narratively flowed with each scenario; for example, "You reply, 'Sure!' and give her your phone number. She's worth getting to know a bit better" would continue the relationship and "You reply, 'Sure,' but don't give her your phone number. She gives you hers, but you won't be calling" would end it. Open response comments in Study 1 suggested that a few participants did not realize which option would continue or end the relationship; to clarify this, "(Stay)" was added to each stay option and "(Leave)" was added to each leave option to ensure participants were fully informed about the decision they were making. Additionally, participants were asked why they decided to end the relationship after they choose to leave a scenario or why they decided to stay if they never end the relationship. These responses served as an attention check, such that participants who did not provide a sensible response (*n* = 2) were excluded from analyses.

Additional measures were included for exploratory purposes. Participants indicated their **romantic interest** for the hypothetical partner after each scenario on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*extremely disinterested*) to 4 (*neither interested nor disinterested*) to 7 (*extremely interested*). Using the same scale, and after the paradigm was completed, participants were also asked to rate their perception of their hypothetical partner's romantic interest in them. After completing the Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm, participants were asked to use a Likert scale to rate their **perceptions of the hypothetical partner** on each of the 17 dealbreakers. For example, "I considered Ben to be... Trustworthy." The scale will range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*neither agree nor disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The full dataset, including these additional measures, can be found at https://osf.io/q47wj/.

Finally, participants completed a demographics questionnaire and were debriefed.

6.4. Results

6.4.1. Descriptive information

On average, participants progressed through 6.61 scenarios (*median* = 5, *SD* = 5.29, *range* = 0 to 17), and were presented with 3.68 potential dealbreakers before choosing to reject the hypothetical dating partner (*median* = 3, *SD* = 2.32, *range* = 0 to 12). Fig. 5 visualizes participants' progress through the story as negative information about the dating partner accumulated. As in Study 1, these results suggest that

Table 3
Study 2 Dealbreaker Scenarios.

Scenario	Topic	Mean Study 1-Rated Importance (*SD*)	Scenario	Topic	Mean Study 1-Rated Importance (*SD*)
1	Attractiveness	3.17(*1.05*)	10	Religious beliefs	2.87(*1.24*)
2	Children	3.71(*1.11*)	11	Sense of humor	4.06(*1.01*)
3	Income	3.56(*1.15*)	12	Alcohol use	4.20(*1.02*)
4	Hygiene	4.28(*0.86*)	13	Trustworthiness	4.77(*0.58*)
5	Dependability	4.36(*0.78*)	14	Laziness	3.78(*0.99*)
6	Sex drive	3.02(*1.09*)	15	Self-confidence	2.91(*1.07*)
7	Exclusivity	4.70(*0.75*)	16	Receptiveness to interests	4.26(*0.85*)
8	Political orientation	3.18(*1.19*)	17	Long-distance	2.81(*1.07*)
9	Anger issues	4.43(*0.85*)			

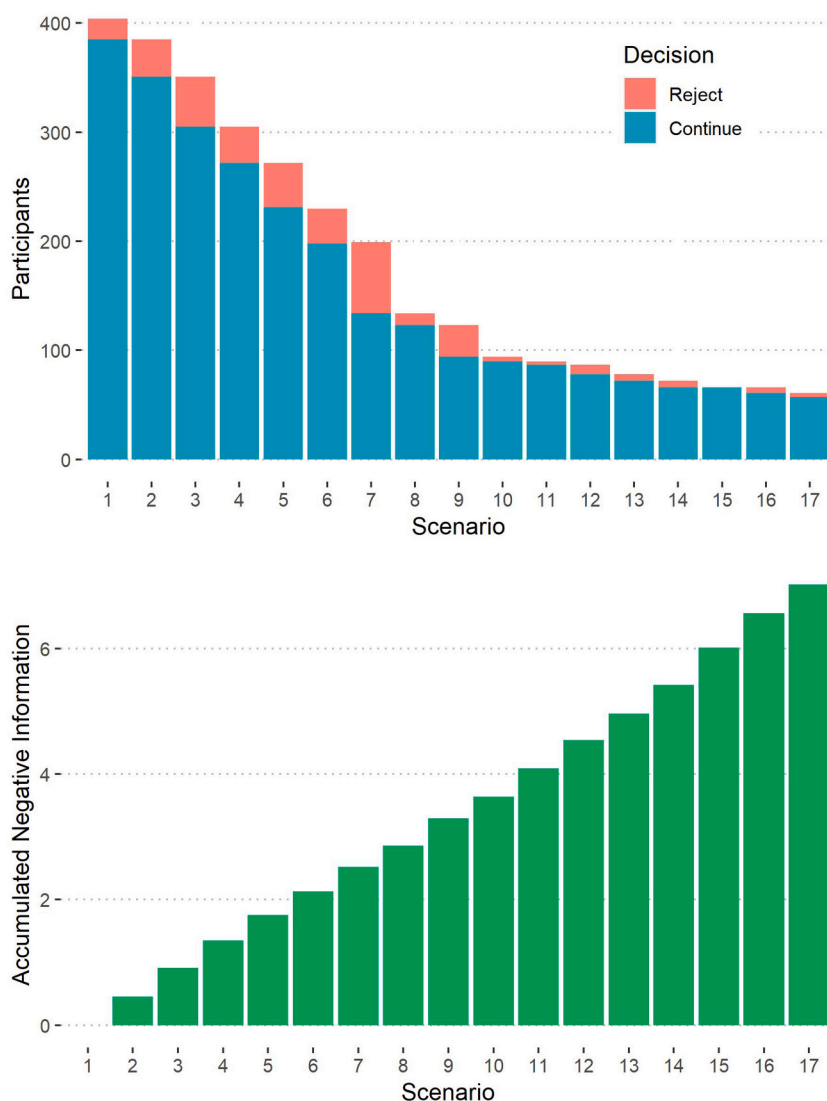*Note.* Full scenarios can be viewed at https://osf.io/q47wj

Fig. 5. Participants' Progress Through the Story as Negative Information Accumulated in Study 2.

participants did not tend to reject their hypothetical partners in response to the first piece of negative information they received. Rather, they tended to encounter multiple potential dealbreakers within the story before choosing to exit. In fact, despite having moved several severe scenarios earlier in the story in Study 2 compared to in Study 1, participants progressed through almost as many scenarios compared to Study 1 (7.41 scenarios).

Unlike in Study 1, personal dealbreakers were measured dichotomously, allowing us to examine the number of self-reported dealbreakers that each participant received in the context of the story. Recall that we had defined dealbreakers for participants as "information that would make you reject someone as a potential long-term, committed partner". Nevertheless, participants received two personal dealbreakers on average before rejection ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.50$, $range = 0$ to 10). That is, participants did not tend to reject potential partners in response to the first personal dealbreaker that was presented to them. Of the scenarios that included one of the participant's own personal dealbreakers, only 29% were met with rejection.

6.5. Did people reject hypothetical partners in response to negative information?

We next tested whether the dealbreaker manipulation was

successful, such that participants were more likely to reject the dating partner in response to negative versus positive versions of each scenario. As in Study 1, we tested this question using discrete-time hazard models, with scenarios nested within participants and with the data organized at the level of the scenario (up to 17 rows of data per participant). Presence or absence of a potential dealbreaker was coded for each scenario (scenario information: 0 = positive, 1 = negative). Participants' decisions were also coded for each scenario (decision: 0 = continue, 1 = reject). Scenario number was represented by 16 dummy-coded variables: Scenarios 2 through 17, with Scenario 1 as the default. We conducted the analyses with logistic regression using the glm function in R. We predicted that scenario information would predict scenario decisions, such that participants would be more likely to end a given scenario when it contained negative information about the partner. We expected that this result would hold controlling for participants' own relationship status, age, and gender.

As predicted, participants were significantly more likely to end the relationship in response to a scenario containing negative rather than positive information about the hypothetical partner, $b = 2.52$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < .001$. In comparison to the first scenario, participants were significantly more likely to end the relationship in response to Scenarios 2–7, 9, and 12, $bs > 0.60$, $ps < 0.05$. Thus, unlike in Study 1, we did not find a consistent effect of time in Study 2 whereby participants were more

likely to end the relationship as the story went on. All these effects held controlling for relationship status, age, and gender. As in Study 1, there was no effect of relationship status, $b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .18$, or age, $b = 0.006$, $SE = 0.007$, $p = .39$, but there was again an effect of target gender such that participants were less likely to end the relationship when the target was a woman, $b = -0.72$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$.

We also explored whether the effect of scenario information (positive versus negative) on participants' decisions was particularly strong or weak for any particular scenario, by adding interaction terms between information and each scenario number to the model described above. We had no specific hypotheses for this model. Of the 16 interactions tested, only one was significant: the interaction between timepoint and Scenario 3 (Income): $b = -1.77$, $SE = 0.82$, $p = .03$. This is approximately the number of significant results one would expect to find by chance alone, suggesting that the impact of information (positive versus negative) on participants' decision to reject the hypothetical partner was generally similar across scenarios. Nevertheless, results were be probed and plotted using the cat_plot function form the interactions package (Long, 2021); see Fig. 6.

6.6. Did the influence of potential dealbreakers accumulate over time?

A key finding from Study 1 was that potential dealbreakers had a cumulative effect on decisions, such that participants were more likely to reject the hypothetical partner with each additional piece of negative information. We predicted that this pattern of results would replicate in Study 2. As in Study 1, we calculated an "accumulated dealbreakers" variable by adding up the total number of potential dealbreakers received by a given participant by the time they reach a given scenario. Note that this variable does not capture whether the current, target scenario contains a potential dealbreaker, which is captured by a separate variable (scenario information).

We conducted another hazard model in which accumulated dealbreakers (uncentered) and scenario information (0 = positive, 1 = negative) were each entered as predictors, and with choice (0 = continue, 1 = reject) as the outcome variable. As above, time was represented in the model as 16 dummy-coded scenario number variables. We predicted that participants would be more likely to reject the partner on a given scenario if they had received more dealbreaker information by that point. We predicted that this effect would hold above participants' relationship status, age, and gender, as well as whether the current scenario contains positive versus negative information.

In the first model tested, the effect of cumulative dealbreakers on rejection decision was marginal, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .08$. However,

once relationship status, age, and target gender were included in the model, the effect of cumulative dealbreakers was significant, $b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .009$. Exploratory analyses showed that the effect of cumulative dealbreakers on rejection decision was not moderated by any of the three control variables. Together, these analyses provide mixed evidence that the influence of negative information accumulated over the course of the study.

6.7. Did self-reported dealbreakers correspond with in-story decisions?

To what extent will people's in-story decisions correspond with their self-reported dealbreakers? As in Study 1, we coded the self-reported dealbreaker data in two ways. First, all 17 dealbreaker items were tallied into an overall count variable. This Level 2 "overall choosiness" variable represents each participant's total number of dealbreakers; i.e., how choosy they claim to be overall. We also paired each item with its corresponding scenario to create a "scenario-specific choosiness" variable. This Level 1 variable represents whether a given scenario pertains to a personal dealbreaker for a given participant (1 = yes, 0 = no). For example, imagine that Alysha selects "poor hygiene" as one of her personal dealbreakers during the background questionnaire, but Tom does not. In this case, the Level 1 dealbreaker variable at Scenario #4—which pertains to the hygiene of the hypothetical partner—will be coded as 1 (yes) at for Alysha and 0 (no) for Tom.

We conducted several discrete-time hazard models predicting choice. All models included scenario number (16 dummy variables) as covariates. In Model 1, overall choosiness was entered as the predictor of interest. We predicted that people who purport to be choosier will exit the story sooner. In Model 2, we entered scenario-specific choosiness as a predictor. Although this model was significant in Study 1, we did not have predictions about whether it would replicate in Study 2. Finally, in Model 3, we tested the interaction between scenario-specific choosiness, and the information that participants received within the scenario. Are participants particularly likely to reject the hypothetical partners in response to their self-reported dealbreakers? The Study 2 design represents a relatively stronger test of this research question than Study 1, because self-reported dealbreakers were collected in a separate survey from the relationship story decisions. Thus, we did not have predictions about whether the pattern of results obtained from this model in Study 1 would replicate in Study 2.

Results can be seen in Table 4. Indeed, people who indicated that they had more personal dealbreakers during prescreening were significantly more likely to reject the hypothetical partner at any given point during the story (Model 1). Participants were also more likely to reject
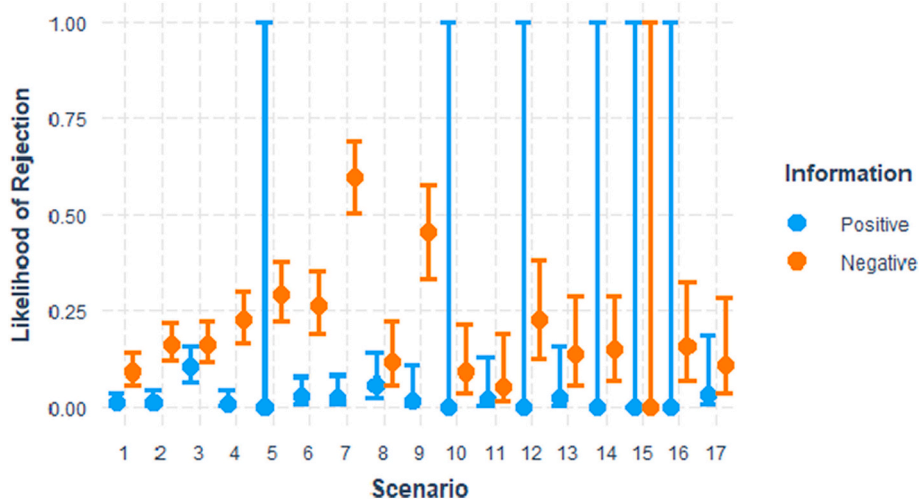

Fig. 6. Impact of Negative Relational Information on Rejection Decisions in Study 2.
Note. As in Study 1, the large error bars for some scenarios are due to empty cells (no participants chose to exit the story in these conditions).

Table 4

Impact of Negative Relational Information on Rejection Decisions as a Function of Self-Reported Dealbreakers in Study 2.

	Decision (0 = Continue, 1 = Reject)		
	b	SE	p
Model 1			
Overall choosiness	0.07	0.02	< 0.001
Model 2			
Scenario-specific choosiness (0 = not a dealbreaker, 1 = is a dealbreaker)	0.92	0.14	< 0.001
Model 3			
Information (0 = positive, 1 = negative)	1.60	0.29	< 0.001
Scenario-specific choosiness (0 = not a dealbreaker, 1 = is a dealbreaker)	−0.24	0.35	0.50
Information*Choosiness	1.43	0.38	< 0.001
Choosiness = 1 (is a personal dealbreaker)			
Information (0 = positive, 1 = negative)	3.02	0.25	< 0.001
Choosiness = 0 (not a personal dealbreaker)			
Information (0 = positive, 1 = negative)	1.60	0.29	< 0.001

participants in response to a given scenario if it concerned a topic that was a personal dealbreaker for them. Finally, participants' likelihood of rejecting a partner in response to a particular piece of negative information depended on whether that negative information was a personal dealbreaker. That is, participants were particularly likely to reject a hypothetical partner in response to a scenario that contained one of their personal dealbreakers, as opposed to one that contained either positive information, or negative information that was not one of their personal dealbreakers. This interaction effect is presented in Fig. 7. Overall, these results suggest that people's self-reported dealbreakers are consistent with how they respond to negative relational information when it is embedded within the context of a broader relationship narrative.
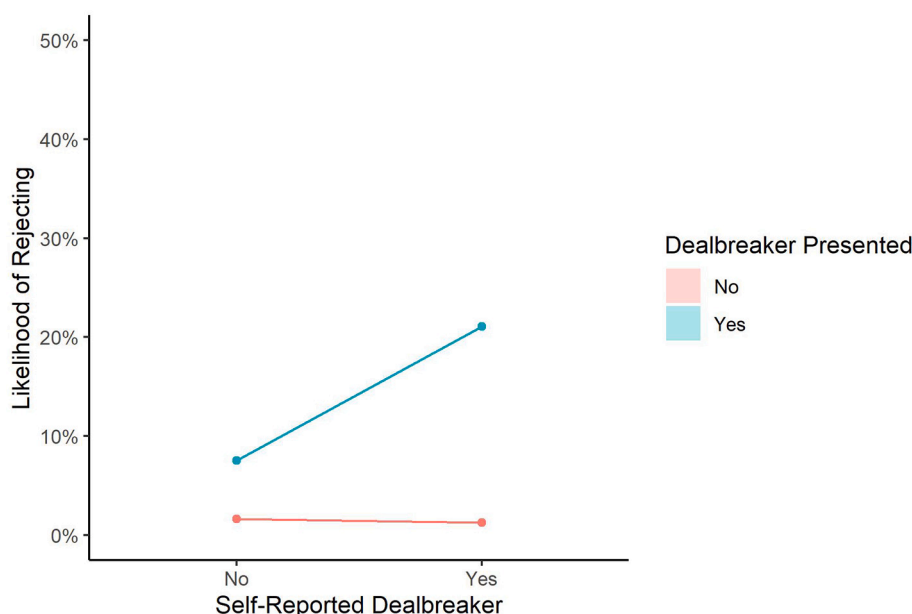
6.8. Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 was a replication and extension of Study 1. In Study 1, we had found that the influence of potential dealbreakers accumulated over the course of the story. We had hypothesized that this effect would replicate in Study 2, such that people would be more likely to reject a partner in response to a given scenario if they had received more pieces of negative information to that point. This hypothesis received mixed support. The effect of accumulated dealbreakers was marginal in the key model, and significant only when the covariates were included. One essential difference that may have impacted the robustness of the cumulative effect is that in Study 1, the severity of the dealbreakers increased as the story progressed, whereas in Study 2, the severity of the dealbreakers was constant throughout the story (i.e., some more severe dealbreakers were moved to earlier in the story). Further research is needed to discern whether the effects obtained in Study 1 were to some extent an artifact of this confound, or if people do in fact incorporate earlier potential dealbreakers into their later decisions.

Regardless of whether the scenarios had a cumulative effect on participants' stay/leave decisions, the total odds of a participant rejecting their partner certainly increased with each new piece of negative information presented. As in Study 1, participants were more likely to reject a partner in response to negative information rather than positive information. Yet, they did not tend to reject hypothetical partners in response to the first piece of negative information they received, instead receiving an average of 3.68 pieces of negative information before choosing to reject.

Replicating Study 1, people's rejection decisions in Study 2 were aligned with their personal dealbreakers, such that people were particularly likely to reject a potential partner in response to negative information that was a personal dealbreaker for them. In the current study, we measured the dealbreakers in a separate survey collected two weeks before the main paradigm; thus, their effect is likely not explained by internal consistency effects. We also measured them dichotomously, and with a clearer and stronger definition ("Dealbreakers are bits of information information that would make you reject someone as a potential long-term, committed partner"). Despite the personal dealbreakers being definitively measured as such, participants did not tend to reject the partner in response to the first personal dealbreaker they encountered. On average, participants received two personal dealbreakers before rejecting a partner, and the odds of rejection in response to a given scenario that contained a personal dealbreaker were 29%.

Fig. 7. Impact of Presenting Negative Information on Decision to Reject is Moderated by Whether the Information is a Personal Dealbreaker in Study 2.

7. General discussion

In the current research, we employed a Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm to study how people process potential relationship deal-breakers. How do different pieces of negative information about new dating partners shape people's decisions to reject those relationships? Do people tend to exit new relationships in response to the first deal-breaker presented, or do they choose to wait and gather additional information? The results of two studies suggest that many dealbreakers may be best conceptualized as *dealbenders*, meaning that the presence of a single supposed dealbreaker is often not sufficient to motivate the decision to reject the partner. Overall, the current findings support the idea that people often disregard potential dealbreakers when they are presented within the context of a broader relationship dynamic. This finding would also suggest that there is value in studying deal-breakers—and information about romantic partners generally—within such a dynamic, rather than as isolated pieces of information.

7.1. Evidence of a progression bias

A recent review of the literature on decision-making in romantic relationships suggests that humans are prone to a progression bias: a preference for relationship decisions that move people toward committed partnerships rather than dissolution (Joel & MacDonald, 2021). Moving a relationship forward often feels effortless, whereas rejecting a romantic partner is difficult. The current findings add to this literature by showing that, in the context of an immersive story about a dating relationship, people will continually overlook red flags in favour of progressing the relationship further. Even when participants encountered one of their own personal dealbreakers—a characteristic that they had previously claimed would make them reject someone as a long-term mate—they did not reliably end the relationship. On average, participants encountered four pieces of negative information (Studies 1 and 2), including two of their own personal dealbreakers (Study 2), before they chose to reject the hypothetical partner. The odds of rejection in response to any given personal dealbreaker were 29%.

A reluctance to end new relationships likely facilitates people's goals of winding up in a long-term partnership. As of the late 2000s, 48% of Americans 25 and older were married (Taylor, 2010). If people typically rejected new partners in response to the first signs of incompatibility that they encountered, it seems doubtful that marriage rates would be so high. At the same time, forces that bind people to new romantic partners, such as attachment and investment, take relatively little time to build (e.g., Fagundes & Schindler, 2012; Heffernan et al., 2012). Thus, ignoring early signs of incompatibility may lead people to become trapped in dissatisfying or unhealthy relationships. The long-term implications of the current findings depend greatly on 1) how well these findings generalize to real relationship development and 2) how diagnostic potential dealbreakers may be of long-term relationship quality.

7.2. Limitations

Despite being more realistic and immersive than one-shot vignettes, the Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm is nevertheless hypothetical, and criticisms of hypothetical relationship scenarios are still valid. Many of the more emotional aspects of relationships, which we know to be potent motivators of relationship decisions, are absent in this hypothetical context. For example, infatuation (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1991; Hazan & Diamond, 2000) and sexual desire (e.g., Birnbaum et al., 2017) powerfully motivate people to spend time and energy with new dating partners, and may thus motivate people to overlook a new dating partner's flaws. Further, concrete investments present barriers to relationship dissolution (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Rusbult, 1980), perhaps even as new, negative information about the partner is acquired. The current design does not capture these processes. For example, in Study 1, participants were more likely to exit the relationship as the story went on, even though in real life, people are less likely to end a relationship as they become increasingly invested (Le & Agnew, 2003). This finding may be a function of the increasing severity and number of the deal-breakers presented in Study 1; indeed, the finding did not replicate in Study 2. However, neither study showed an investment-consistent pattern whereby the relationship becomes increasingly stable as it develops.

Despite the limitations, the current design may offer important benefits for those wishing to study early relationship processes. Longitudinal studies of new dating relationships are time-consuming and expensive to conduct, particularly if they are to be adequately powered. The current pair of studies will introduce a new, cost-effective tool for tweaking and testing models of early relationship development that can then be tested on real prospective samples. The story design captures the sequential, iterative nature of new relationships in a way that static scenarios do not. Yet, this design still maintains experimental control; unlike in studies of real relationships, features of the partner and events within the hypothetical relationship can be randomly assigned. The multi-scenario, within-sample design also leads to highly powered analyses, even while many aspects of the story are independently manipulated.

8. Conclusions

Vicary and Fraley (2007) first proposed the Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm for studying relationship dynamics over a decade ago. At the time, the tools required to implement it were not yet widely available (e.g., randomizing features in survey software, knowledge of multilevel modelling techniques). Today, however, this paradigm may offer an accessible, controlled way to study sequential relationship decisions. To our knowledge, the current studies are the first to apply this technique to mate choice, and particularly to the highly understudied phase of fledgling relationships.

Using this technique, we found that self-reported dealbreakers, although consistent with the in-story decisions that people made, were not treated as dealbreakers in the true sense of the term. People may be willing to overlook the occasional red flag in favour of progressing the relationship further and getting to know their partner better.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104328.

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