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Warning! You Are About to Enter “The Friend Zone”: College Students' Experiences with the Friend  
Zone and Perceptions of Fictional Characters in Friend-Zone Roles

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Honors Project

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Author Note

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### Abstract

People are put into “the friend zone” when they want to pursue a romantic relationship with a friend but find that their friend wants only a platonic relationship. With this research I (a) estimated the frequencies of heterosexual college students' having put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone and having been put into the friend zone by an opposite-sex friend, (b) examined the emotions associated with these friend-zone experiences, and (c) explored college students' perceptions of characters navigating a friend-zone experience as depicted in two short video clips. Discussion focuses on results concerning the ubiquity of friend-zone experiences, the emotions associated with rejecting and being rejected by a friend, and identification with and interpretation of fictional characters.

Warning! You Are About to Enter “The Friend Zone”: College Students' Experiences with the Friend Zone and Perceptions of Fictional Characters in Friend-Zone Roles

Romantic love is something that most people desire (Buss, 2003). Unrequited love, however, occurs when one person wants to form a romantic relationship with someone who is not similarly interested. In other words, unrequited love occurs when one person's romantic desires are not reciprocated by the person who is the object of the affection. For the purposes of this research, I use the term “rejected” to refer to a person whose romantic feelings for another person are not reciprocated, and I use the term “rejector” to refer to a person who is the recipient of another person's romantic desire but who does not reciprocate these feelings. Rejectors can experience uncertainty, guilt, anger, annoyance, and resentment; the rejected can experience longing, preoccupation, lowered self-esteem, and negative affect (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993).

When unrequited love occurs between two friends, it can be said that the rejected person has been put into “the friend zone.” People are put into the friend zone when they are attracted to a friend and want to pursue either a romantic or sexual relationship with this friend; however, this friend only wants a platonic relationship. Whether one is being put in the friend zone or is putting someone else into the friend zone, the experience can be uncomfortable. Moreover, the experience of romantic and/or sexual feeling developing within opposite-sex friendships is common. Halatsis and Christakis (2009) found that over half of those surveyed (57.3%) had been sexually attracted to an opposite-sex friend. Of those who felt attraction, over half (55.1%) expressed it to the friend (Halatsis & Christakis, 2009). Therefore, many people, over the course of their lives, may be put into the friend zone and/or put others into the friend zone.

**Parental Investment Theory, Mate Value, and Romantic Rejection**

When looking for potential long-term mates, men and women look for somewhat different traits. Physical attractiveness is important in romantic interactions, but men are more likely than women to value it in their potential long-term partners (Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1992; Walster, Aronson, & Abrahams, 1966). Women tend to value socioeconomic status, character (honesty and sincerity), intelligence, and ambitiousness more than men (Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1992). Because women have a greater parental investment in offspring (nine months of internal gestation), they place a premium on traits that would be associated with a male partner investing resources in them and their children (Trivers, 1972). This point is further supported because women tend to look for characteristics in men that would help any potential offspring survive (Feingold, 1992).

In addition, because women have a greater reproductive investment in children, they tend to be more discriminating than men in choosing partners (Trivers, 1972). In order to select a partner, women and men assess the overall attractiveness, or mate value, of potential partners. Mate value refers to one's degree of desirability as a mate to a partner (Edlund & Sagarin, 2010). Although women tend to be more selective than men in general, people who have a higher mate value prefer partners who also have higher mate values (Edlund & Sagarin, 2010; Regan, 1998). Thus, women with high mate values tend to be quite selective when choosing a long-term mate (Buss & Shackelford, 2008; Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993). Due to women's tendency to exhibit more choosiness, research has shown that men are more likely to be rejected by women, while women are more likely to be the rejectors of men in terms of unrequited love (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993; Hill, Blakemore, & Drumm, 1997). For experiences with the friend zone, this means that men are more likely than women to be “put into the friend zone” by an opposite-sex friend.

One reason that men may get rejected more often than women is because they tend to misperceive women's friendly behavior as sexual interest (Abbey, 1982; Abbey, 1987; Haselton, 2003; Haselton & Buss, 2000; Koenig, Kirkpatrick, & Ketelaar, 2007). For instance, men may be more likely than women to interpret an opposite-sex friend's laughing at his jokes and wanting to spend time together as indicators of romantic interest. In support of this notion, men tend to be more attracted to their opposite-sex friend than women, have a stronger desire to date their opposite-sex friend than women, and overestimate their friends' desire to date them (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012; Koenig et al., 2007). Furthermore, men are more likely than women to list attraction and dating potential as benefits of opposite-sex friendships (Bleske & Buss, 2000; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001; Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012). Women tend to under-perceive men's sexual interest in them (whereas men over-perceive), but are usually able to reasonably estimate their friends' interest in dating them (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012, Koenig et al., 2007). They are more likely to view attraction to and dating potential of a partner as a *cost* of opposite-sex friendships, and a lack of dating potential as a *benefit* of opposite-sex friendships (Bleske & Buss, 2000; Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012).

The different perceptions heterosexual men and women may have about opposite-sex friends can create situations that are conducive to romantic rejection. Rejection can have many negative effects, such as negative emotions (anger, hurt, sadness) and antisocial urges (such as desire to humiliate or threaten) on the part of the rejected (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004). With the negative consequences rejection can cause, including the disruption of caring and beneficial friendships, the phenomenon of the friend zone is very important to understand. With this research, I wanted to examine how people react to being involved in a friend-zone experience and how they perceive others who are involved in a friend-zone experience. Thus, I

briefly describe the links between experience, empathy, and identification with characters in various forms of media (e.g., movie characters) in the next section.

### **Identification with and Empathy for Fictional Characters**

Cohen (2001) defined identification as “an imaginative process invoked as a response to characters presented within mediated texts... While strongly identifying, the audience member ceases to be aware of his or her social role as an audience member and temporarily (but usually repeatedly) adopts the perspective of the character with whom he or she identifies” (pp. 250-251). Studies have shown that greater perceived similarity with a character increases identification (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Perceived similarity can be based on a number of factors, including demographic variables. For instance, people tend to feel greater similarity with characters of the same sex (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Sex is one of the most salient characteristics of a person and his or her identity, so it is one of the primary characteristics with which people identify.

Nomura and Akai (2012) found that empathy for fictional characters correlates with empathy for real people, suggesting that people feel empathy for fictional characters and real people in similar ways. One of the major factors that can influence empathy is perceived similarity. For empathy, this perceived similarity generally comes in the form of having similar experiences as another person (such as also experiencing the death of a parent). Greater similarity of experience is positively correlated with empathy (Eklund, Andersson-Stråberg, & Hansen, 2009). Barnett, Tetreault, and Masbad (1987) found that women who have been raped felt more empathy for rape victims presented on video than did women who had not been raped. Women who had just given birth to their first child and women pregnant with their first child felt more empathy for videotaped new mothers than women who had never been pregnant and



birthed a child (Hodges, Kiel, Kramer, Veach, & Villanueva, 2010). Therefore, in the current research, I explored whether male and female participants react differently to male and female characters who are portrayed in video clips as being put into the friend zone (the “rejected” character) and putting their friend into the friend zone (the “rejector” character). The use of these terms does not imply that rejected characters are completely spurned by the rejectors. Implicit in friend-zone experiences is the idea that rejectors are simply rejecting their friend romantically, not platonically: the rejectors still accept their friend as a friend.

### **Current Study**

Male and female participants watched a scene from a movie that portrayed one member of an opposite-sex friendship dyad (the rejector) putting his/her friend (the rejected) into the friend zone (by not reciprocating the other's romantic feelings); they completed a survey in which they answered a series of questions about both the rejector and the rejected. Then they watched a second film clip that was similar in content, except that the sex of the rejector and rejected was reversed as compared to the first clip. Participants again completed a survey about their perceptions of both the rejector and the rejected. Participants watched the video clips and answered the surveys in one of two counterbalanced orders. In the second part of the study, participants answered questions about their personal experiences with putting someone into the friend zone and being put into the friend zone. Participants also provided demographic information.

This study was designed to examine four main predictions. First, I expected female participants to report having more experience than male participants with putting opposite-sex friends into the friend zone (prediction 1a). Conversely, I expected male participants to report having more experience than female participants with having been put into the friend zone by an

opposite-sex friend (prediction 1b). Second, across both male and female participants, I expected the rejector role to be associated with feeling more guilt and shame than the rejected role (prediction 2a). Conversely, I expected the rejected role to be associated with feeling more sadness and anxiety (i.e., more upset) than the rejector role (prediction 2b). Third, I expected male and female participants to judge the opposite-sex rejector more harshly than the same-sex rejector (prediction 3a). Similarly, I expected that male and female participants would judge the same-sex rejected character more positively than the opposite-sex rejected character (prediction 3b). In general, I expected that participants would display in-group favoritism toward characters of the same sex. Lastly, I expected the number of times participants had been put into the friend zone to predict their degree of identification with the rejected characters portrayed in the film clips (prediction 4a); I also expected the number of times participants had put another person into the friend zone to predict their degree of identification with the rejectors portrayed in the video clips (prediction 4b).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were 167 undergraduate students at Bowling Green State University who signed up for a study called “Opposite-Sex Friendships” using the SONA online experiment management system. Participants completed the study online. After dropping from analysis any participants who did not follow instructions or failed to complete a majority of items, the working sample was comprised of 137 females and 24 males. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 32 years, with a mean age of 19.26 years. Of the 161 participants, 83.2% were White/Caucasian; 6.8% were Black/African American; 3.1% were Hispanic/Latino(a); 0.6% were Asian; 1.2% were Pacific Islander; 3.1% were Biracial/Multiracial; and, 1.9% identified

their race/ethnicity as Other. Most participants (93.2%) identified as heterosexual, while 2.5% identified as homosexual; 2.5% identified as bisexual; and, 1.9% identified their sexual orientation as Other. In terms of current relationship status, 43% of participants were not dating anyone; 11% were casually dating someone; 39% were in a serious, committed relationship; 6% were cohabiting/engaged/married; and, 1% listed their relationship status as Other.

## Materials

**Informed consent.** The information sheet and informed consent form provided general information about the study, telling participants that the study was about first impressions and relationships. The form assured them that their information would be completely anonymous and that they had the option to quit the study at any time without any consequences. See Appendix A.

**Stimulus materials.** The video clips were taken from modern media sources. They were found via a mixture of recommendations from a focus group and searching the internet for friend-zone-related media clips. The clip that portrayed a male being put into the friend zone was taken from the movie *Something Borrowed*, in which Ethan confesses his love for his friend Rachel. The clip was 2 minutes and 45 seconds long. The clip that portrayed a female being put into the friend zone was taken from the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, in which the character Fiona tells longtime friend Charles about her continued feelings for him. The clip was 2 minutes and 2 seconds long. I tried to pick clips that had a similarly conveyed confession of romantic feelings, and a similarly intense response to the confession. I also tried to find clips that demonstrated that the characters would remain friends, even after the rejection. I tried to control for these elements so that the major difference between the clips would be the sexes of the rejected and the rejector.

## Measures

**Perceptions of rejected and rejector characters in film clips.** After watching a video clip, participants completed a survey that was designed for the purposes of this study, in which they were asked to rate the male and the female character (in counterbalanced order) on eighteen 7-point bipolar trait scales (e.g., unkind-kind, immoral-moral, disloyal-loyal, unemotional-emotional). The survey asked participants to indicate the extent to which they identified with each character (0 = not at all; 6 = very strongly). This survey also asked if participants were familiar with the video clips (0 = not at all; 6 = extremely). See Appendix B.

I submitted the eighteen trait items to a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. A three-factor solution accounted for 66.3% of the variance. The first factor was named Likeability (8 items;  $\alpha = .93$ ). The second factor was named Honesty (7 items;  $\alpha = .91$ ). The third factor was named Nervousness (2 items;  $\alpha = .74$ ). Because it is unclear whether nervousness corresponds to a positive or negative trait within the context of this study, I will not analyze or discuss this trait further. One item (impulsive) did not load on any factor, so I will, likewise, not discuss this trait further. After reverse scoring as appropriate, two composite variables were made to correspond to the constructs of likeability and honesty.

**Validity check.** In each video clip one member of an opposite-sex friendship revealed their romantic feelings to her/his friend, who did not reciprocate the romantic feelings. To assess the degree to which participants perceived this relationship dynamic accurately, I asked them to choose which of two statements (One person expressed romantic feelings toward a friend and those feelings *were* reciprocated; One person expressed romantic feelings toward a friend and those feelings *were not* reciprocated) best represented what happened in the video clip. In the end, only 51.6% of participants answered both validity check questions correctly. I suspect that this high error rate was due to many participants not being familiar with the meaning of the word

“reciprocated,” not because they did not accurately perceive the dynamic that had unfolded between the characters in the movie clips. I retained the data of the participants who answered one or both questions incorrectly because excluding them did not change the results of the study.

**Personal experiences with the friend zone.** After participants had watched both video clips and completed the trait surveys for the characters in both clips, participants completed the personal experiences survey. The survey asked participants how often they had been put into the friend zone (how often have you wanted to develop a romantic relationship with an opposite-sex friend, but that friend just wanted to remain friends?). Response options were “never,” “once,” “two to three times,” “four to five times,” and “other.” Those that had experienced this then indicated the extent to which they had felt each of nine emotions (e.g., anxious, depressed, angry) during this experience on a 7-point Likert scale (0 = not at all; 6 = very much). The survey also asked participants how often they had put someone into the friend zone (how often has an opposite-sex friend wanted to develop a romantic relationship with you, but you just wanted to remain friends?). Response options were the same as described above. Participants then responded to the same nine items regarding the emotions they felt during these situations. See Appendix C.

I submitted the nine emotion items to a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. A two-factor solution accounted for 64.4% of the variance. The first factor was named Upset (8 items;  $\alpha = .90$ ). The remaining item, Guilty/Ashamed, loaded by itself (factor loading = .89) and will be treated as a single item.

**Demographics.** Finally, participants completed a demographics survey. The survey included questions on gender, age, race/ethnicity, relationship status, and sexual orientation. See Appendix D.

**Procedure**

Participants were informed via the consent sheet that the study was about opposite-sex friendships and first impressions. After reading through the informed consent sheet, participants had the option to provide informed consent or exit the survey. Once the participants provided informed consent, they read the instructions for watching the video clips, which told them to pay attention to the dialogue and non-verbal behavior of the characters, as well as their own reactions to the video. Once the participants read the instructions, they watched two video clips in counterbalanced order. Half watched the video in which a male was put into the friend zone by a female friend first, then the video in which a female was put into the friend zone by a male friend. Half watched the video in which a female was put into the friend zone by a male friend first, then the video in which a male was put into the friend zone by a female friend. After watching the first clip, participants filled out a survey that asked them to rate the rejected character on a set of eighteen traits, and then rate the rejector character on the same set of traits. Participants also indicated how much they identified with each character, how familiar they were with the clip, and what they thought occurred in the clip. Then, participants watched the second film clip, and completed the same survey about the characters in the second clip.

After watching both clips and answering the questions about them, participants proceeded to a questionnaire regarding their own experiences with the friend zone. The survey asked participants how many times they had been put into the friend zone by an opposite-sex friend. If participants had been put into the friend zone before, they indicated to what extent they felt each of nine emotions during the experience. The survey also asked participants how many times they had put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone. If the participants had put someone into the friend zone before, they answered to what extent they felt the same nine emotions during that

experience. Then, participants completed a demographic survey about their age, gender, race/ethnicity, current relationship status, and sexual orientation.

## Results

### Frequencies of Friend-Zone Experiences

To investigate the prediction that females would report more experience than males with *putting an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone* (prediction 1a), I examined the frequencies with which females and males indicated that they had never done this, done this once, done this two to three times, or done this four to five times. Men (37.50%) reported having never put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone significantly more than women (13.14%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 161) = 8.68, p = .003$ . There was no significant difference between the number of women and the number of men that had put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone once,  $\chi^2(1, N = 161) = 2.30, p = .129$ . Although not significant, the result was in the expected direction, as more women (27.00%) than men (12.50%) indicated that they had put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone once. Additionally, there was also no significant difference between the number of women and men that had put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone two to three times,  $\chi^2(1, N = 161) = 1.18, p = .277$ . Even so, the result was consistent with the prediction, in that more women (45.26%) than men (33.33%) reported having put an opposite sex friend into the friend zone two to three times. There was also no significant difference between the number of women and men that had put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone four to five times,  $\chi^2(1, N = 161) = .07, p = .793$ , and, in fact, the proportions of men (16.67%) and women (14.60%) who had put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone four to five times were very similar. Overall, three out of four comparisons regarding the frequencies with which men and women had put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone were in the direction that I expected; however, only one result

achieved statistical significance.

To examine the prediction that males would report more experience than females with being *put into the friend zone by an opposite-sex friend* (prediction 1b), I performed an analysis similar to that described above. There was no significant difference between the number of men and women that had never been put into the friend zone by an opposite-sex friend,  $\chi^2(1, N = 160) = .19, p = .661$ . Even so, the difference was in the predicted direction, as women (25.00%) reported having never been put into the friend zone by an opposite-sex friend more frequently than men (20.83%). Similarly, there was no significant difference between the number of men and women that had been put into the friend zone by an opposite-sex friend once,  $\chi^2(1, N = 160) = 1.09, p = .296$ . Yet, this result was also consistent with predictions, in that more women (40.44%) than men (29.17%) indicated that they had been put into the friend zone only once. Similarly, there was no significant difference between the number of men and women that had been put into the friend zone two to three times,  $\chi^2(1, N = 160) = 1.08, p = .298$ . However, this result was also in the expected direction, as more men (41.67%) than women (30.88%) marked that they had been put into the friend zone by an opposite-sex friend two to three times. Additionally, there was no significant difference between the number of men and women that had been put into the friend zone four to five times,  $\chi^2(1, N = 160) = 1.06, p = .304$ . These results were also in the expected direction, as more men (8.33%) than women (3.68%) reported having been put into the friend zone four to five times. In the end, all four comparisons regarding the frequencies with which men and women have been put into the friend zone were in the expected direction; however, none achieved statistical significance.

### **Emotions Associated with Friend-Zone Experiences**

To analyze the prediction that participants would report feeling more guilt/shame when in



the *rejector* role than in the *rejected* role (prediction 2a), I conducted a dependent-samples t-test on the guilt/shame item. As expected, the rejector role was associated with feeling more guilt/shame ( $M = 4.17, SD = 2.29$ ) than the rejected role ( $M = 3.59, SD = 2.06$ ),  $t(110) = 2.49, p = .014$ . To explore whether participants reported feeling more sadness and anxiety (i.e., more upset) when in the *rejected* role than in the *rejector* role (prediction 2b), I conducted a dependent-samples t-test on the upset composite. Also as predicted, the rejected role was associated with feeling more upset ( $M = 4.57, SD = 1.44$ ) than the rejector role ( $M = 2.47, SD = 1.14$ ),  $t(109) = 13.96, p < .001$ .

To examine these results more closely, I analyzed the aforementioned results separately for male and female participants. Consistent with expectations, females rejectors reported feeling more guilt/shame ( $M = 4.24, SD = 2.30$ ) than rejected females ( $M = 3.59, SD = 2.08$ ),  $t(97) = 2.56, p = .012$ . However, in a departure from the overall results, there was no significant difference among males in terms of how much guilt/shame they felt when they put their friend into the friend zone ( $M = 3.62, SD = 2.26$ ) versus when they themselves were put into the friend zone ( $M = 3.54, SD = 1.98$ ),  $t(12) = .13, p = .899$ . It should be noted, though, that the sample size for male participants was quite low ( $n = 13$ ). Also in the expected direction, rejected females reported feeling more upset ( $M = 4.61, SD = 1.48$ ) than female rejectors ( $M = 2.47, SD = 1.03$ ),  $t(96) = 13.18, p < .001$ . Similarly, rejected males reported feeling more upset ( $M = 4.26, SD = 1.15$ ) than male rejectors ( $M = 2.47, SD = 1.83$ ),  $t(12) = 4.56, p = .001$ . Therefore, five out of six comparisons involving the emotional experiences of participants who had put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone and of participants who had been put into the friend zone were consistent with the predictions.

### **Perceptions of the Fictional Characters**

To explore the prediction that male and female participants would evaluate an opposite-sex rejector as less likeable and less honest than the same-sex rejector (prediction 3a), I conducted a 2 (sex of participant: male, female) x 2 (sex of rejector: male, female) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on perceived likeability and honesty. There was a significant main effect for sex of the rejector for the likeability composite,  $F(1, 157) = 9.64, p = .002$ . Overall, participants perceived the female rejector as more likeable ( $M = 5.51, SD = 1.18$ ) than the male rejector ( $M = 5.14, SD = 1.08$ ). No other significant effects emerged from this analysis. To examine prediction 3a specifically, I conducted a series of planned comparisons. As expected, female participants perceived the female rejector as more likeable ( $M = 5.47, SD = 1.24$ ) than the male rejector ( $M = 5.14, SD = 1.12$ ),  $t(134) = 2.64, p = .009$ . However, contrary to expectations, male participants also perceived the female rejector as more likeable ( $M = 5.68, SD = .87$ ) than the male rejector ( $M = 5.04, SD = .89$ ),  $t(23) = 2.76, p = .011$ . Thus, these results are partially consistent with the prediction.

To examine the prediction that male and female participants would evaluate the same-sex rejected character as more likeable and honest than the opposite-sex rejected character (prediction 3b), I conducted a 2 (sex of participant: male, female) x 2 (sex of rejected character: male, female) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on perceived likeability and honesty. There was a significant main effect of sex of the rejected character on likeability,  $F(1, 156) = 109.21, p < .001$ . Altogether, participants perceived the rejected male as more likeable ( $M = 6.16, SD = .95$ ) than the rejected female ( $M = 4.53, SD = 1.09$ ). There was also a significant main effect of sex of the rejected character on honesty,  $F(1, 155) = 52.22, p < .001$ . Overall, participants perceived the rejected male as more honest ( $M = 6.21, SD = .95$ ) than the rejected female ( $M = 5.28, SD = 1.11$ ). No other significant effects emerged from this analysis. However, to examine the

prediction specifically, I conducted a series of planned comparisons. Consistent with expectations, male participants perceived the rejected male as more likeable ( $M = 6.04$ ,  $SD = .70$ ) than the rejected female ( $M = 4.66$ ,  $SD = .77$ ),  $t(22) = 6.77$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, male participants perceived the rejected male as more honest ( $M = 6.26$ ,  $SD = .76$ ) than the rejected female ( $M = 5.32$ ,  $SD = .83$ ),  $t(22) = 6.65$ ,  $p < .001$ . In contrast with the prediction, female participants perceived the rejected female as less likeable ( $M = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) than the rejected male ( $M = 6.25$ ,  $SD = .93$ ),  $t(134) = 14.81$ ,  $p < .001$ . Furthermore, female participants perceived the rejected female as less honest ( $M = 5.26$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) than the rejected male ( $M = 6.26$ ,  $SD = .91$ ),  $t(133) = 9.23$ ,  $p < .001$ . Therefore, these results offer partial support for prediction 3b.

Finally, I expected participants' personal experiences with having been put into the friend to predict their degree of identification with the rejected characters within the film clips (prediction 4a). Conforming to this prediction, there was a positive correlation between the number of times participants reported having been put into the friend zone and how much they reported identifying with both the male ( $r = .17$ ,  $p = .035$ ) and female ( $r = .21$ ,  $p = .007$ ) rejected characters. I also expected participants' personal experiences with having put opposite-sex friends into the friend zone to predict their degree of identification with the rejector characters (prediction 4b). In support of this prediction, there was a positive correlation between the number of times participants indicated having put opposite-sex friends into the friend zone and how much they indicated identifying with both the male ( $r = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and female ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ) rejector characters. Thus, as expected, participants' personal experiences with the friend zone seem to contribute to their feelings of identification with movie characters who are depicted as going through experiences similar to what the participants have gone through themselves.<sup>1</sup>

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□ Although not expected, it is interesting to note that, in addition to how much participants reported identifying

### Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore college students' experiences with and perceptions of the friend zone. Based on prior research, I had four main predictions. First, I predicted that female participants would report more experience than male participants with putting friends into the friend zone. This prediction was supported by the finding that more men than women reported having never put an opposite-sex friend into the friend zone I also predicted that male participants would have more experience than female participants with having been put into the friend zone by an opposite-sex friend. All four comparisons made to examine this prediction were not significant, but all were in the expected direction. The significance levels of these results were most likely influenced by the low number of male participants ( $n = 24$ ). Given this, there was probably not enough statistical power for each of the comparisons to be significant. It is possible that the results would have been significant had there been more statistical power. Overall, these results mirror the results of Baumeister's study on unrequited love, providing more support for his findings that men are romantically rejected more often than women and that women romantically reject others more than men. Additionally, the results are in line with what would be expected under a parental investment theory model. However, due to the small sample size of male participants, these specific results should be regarded cautiously.

Second, I expected that the rejector role would be associated with feeling more guilt/shame than the rejected role, and that the rejected role would be more associated with feeling more upset than the rejector role. When I examined these predictions for the entire

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with the female and male rejectors, the number of times participants reported having put opposite-sex friends into the friend zone was also significantly correlated to how much participants identified with both the male ( $r = .247, p = .002$ ) and female ( $r = .292, p < .001$ ) rejected characters. There are three speculative interpretations of this. First, rejectors may have greater perspective-taking skills and empathy than the rejected, being able to see the rejected friends' side more easily than the rejected friends are able to see their side. Second, there could have been more participants who have occupied both the rejected role and the rejector role in the sample, causing them to more readily identify with both roles. Third, these results could have been a coincidence.

sample and separately among female and male participants, the results supported the predictions. These results also conceptually replicate and extend the results from the Baumeister et al. study mentioned above. They found that rejecting someone romantically is more associated with feeling guilt/shame than being romantically rejected, and that being romantically rejected is more associated with feeling more upset than romantically rejecting someone, which I also found.

Third, I predicted that male and female participants would judge the opposite-sex rejector as less likeable and honest than the same-sex rejector. This prediction was partially supported. Female participants evaluated the same-sex rejector as more likeable than the opposite-sex rejector. Female participants also evaluated the same-sex rejector as more honest than the opposite-sex rejector, though this was not significant. However, male participants evaluated the opposite-sex rejector as more likeable than the same-sex rejector. Male participants also evaluated the opposite-sex rejector as more honest than the same-sex rejector, but this was not significant. Along similar lines, I predicted that male and female participants would judge the same-sex rejected character as more likeable and honest than the opposite-sex rejected character. This prediction was partially supported. Male participants evaluated the same-sex rejected character as more likeable than the opposite-sex rejected character. Similarly, male participants evaluated the same-sex rejected character as more honest than the opposite-sex rejected character. However, female participants evaluated the opposite-sex rejected character as more likeable than the same-sex rejected character. Additionally, female participants evaluated the opposite-sex rejected character as more honest than the same-sex rejected character.

Thus, the prediction of an in-group favoritism among participants toward same-sex characters was only partially supported. Although it is speculative, these results could suggest that female participants displayed a favoritism toward female rejectors because they are more

likely to have had personal experience with that role. Likewise, these results could suggest that male participants displayed a favoritism toward males who had been rejected because they are likely to have had more personal experience with that role. Future research could explore this possibility.

There is another speculative interpretation for the finding that both male and female participants perceived the rejected male to be more likeable and honest than the rejected female. The rejected male character resembles the average, but charming male underdog character that is the protagonist of many television shows, movies, books, and video games. It is possible that both male and female participants have learned to identify with such a character type through repeated exposure to it. The male underdog is usually quite likeable and honest so that audience members identify with him and support his position. It is conceivable that the rejected male's resemblance to this character type was a factor in the participants' perceptions of him. Additionally, this dorky male underdog does not have many female counterparts in media, so participants may not be accustomed to identifying with and support a character such as the rejected female. Overall, the results from these two predictions provide mixed support for the association between perceived similarity and identification. Further research that examines additional factors is needed to clearly understand these findings.

Finally, I expected and found that the number of times participants had been put into the friend zone predicted their degree of identification with the rejected characters. I also expected and found that the number of times participants had put someone else into the friend zone predicted their degree of identification with the rejectors. These results support the notion that perceived similarity in terms of experience is associated with identification with fictional characters. Because life experiences affect identification with characters, they also affect the

audience's relationship with characters as a whole, and thus, media texts as well.

There are several limitations to this study. First and foremost, this study had very few male participants ( $n = 24$ ) as compared to female participants ( $n = 137$ ). Because of this, the findings of this study involving sex of participants must be cautiously regarded. Future studies should ensure that they have more equal numbers of male and female participants. Second, I did not conduct a test to determine if the video clips accurately portrayed one person being put into the friend zone by an opposite-sex friend. Future studies should conduct such a test to ensure the validity of the clips. Third, I did not conduct any tests to determine if the video clips were similar in content besides the sex of the rejected character and of the rejector character. Future studies that use video clips as stimuli should include this kind of test so that they can be sure that there are no confounding factors in the video clips.

## **Conclusion**

The current research examined the phenomenon of the friend zone. This study is important for several reasons. First, there are not many studies that examine the frequencies and emotions associated with romantic rejection. Moreover, there are currently no published studies that explore the friend zone specifically. Thus, this study fills a gap in the research by providing frequencies of male experience with the friend zone and female experience with the friend zone, as well as providing basic information on the emotions felt by people who are put into the friend zone and people who put others into the friend zone. The friend zone is a recently-coined term; however, the phenomenon itself likely is evolutionarily ancient (see Buss, 1993). For instance, numerous examples can be found throughout the animal kingdom of male members of a species (e.g., fiddler crab, peacock, natterjack toad) attempting to pursue female members of the species, only to be rejected (Gibson & Langen, 1996).

Second, this study found mixed results for the relationship between perceived similarity based on sex and identification. It is possible that sex is not as salient a component of perceived similarity as other studies have found. Just because a character is the same sex as audience members does not mean that they will want to identify with him or her. Other factors might be more significant to audience members for perceived similarity, such as their own life experiences. Given that people are increasingly engaging with media today, sometimes on multiple platforms, examining how people interact with, interpret, and are affected by media texts will become increasingly important as well.



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## Appendix A

## Informed Consent Sheet

Before the study begins, there are several things for you to note:

1. You are invited to participate in a research study in which we are interested in asking you some questions about opposite-sex friendships, including: (a) how you perceive specific opposite-sex friendships as they are portrayed in a couple of short video clips, and (b) your personal experiences with opposite-sex friendships. Your participation will involve answering a series of questions about these topics. You will also be asked to provide some demographic information about yourself.
2. You are eligible to participate in this study if you are at least 18 years old and an undergraduate student at BGSU.
3. We anticipate that your participation will take approximately 20 - 30 minutes.
4. The benefits of participating in this project include: helping us to understand people's views about and experiences with opposite-sex friendships. By participating in this study, you will learn about how psychologists conduct research on these kinds of topics. You may also benefit, personally, from an increased awareness of your own views toward opposite-sex friendships.
5. We do not anticipate any risks associated with participating in this study. If there are any questions in this study that you are not comfortable answering you may skip those items.
6. Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your grades or class standing or your relationship with Bowling Green State University, your professors, the Psychology department, or Dr. Anne K. Gordon.
7. Please note that your questionnaire answers are anonymous. We will not be collecting any information from you that would enable us to connect you, personally, with your survey responses. Your responses will not be saved until you click the “Submit” button at the end of the survey.
8. Because the Internet is not 100% secure in terms of privacy, please do not leave the partially completed survey open or unattended if completing it on a public computer. You should clear the browser page history and cache when finished with the survey.
9. At the end of the study you will be given information about the purpose of this study.
10. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the Principal Investigator:

Ashley Chapman, Honors Student, Department of Psychology, BGSU, (419) 601-

2301, achapma@bgsu.edu.

You may also contact the faculty advisor who is supervising this project:

Anne K. Gordon, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, Psychology Department, BGSU, (419) 372-8161, akg@bgsu.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about participants' rights or if any problems or concerns arise during the course of the study, you may contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University, (419) 372-7716, hsrb@bgsu.edu.

Participation in this project is voluntary. Please click on the button below or exit this browser window to indicate your informed decision regarding whether or not you will participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I have read and been informed of the risks and benefits associated with participating in this study, and I agree to participate. I certify that I meet the eligibility requirements for this study.

## Appendix B

## Character Traits Survey

Instructions: Now that you have watched the first of two video clips, we are first interested in learning your impressions of the **male character**. Read each item below carefully, and select the number on the scale that most closely matches your immediate impressions of this person. Do not think too long about your answer. There are no right or wrong answers here.

\*\*Please rate the *male* character from this video clip on each of the following traits:

- |      |               |                                 |             |
|------|---------------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| 1.)  | Unkind        | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Kind        |
| 2.)  | Unfriendly    | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Friendly    |
| 3.)  | Dishonest     | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Honest      |
| 4.)  | Unlikeable    | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Likeable    |
| 5.)  | Unattractive  | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Attractive  |
| 6.)  | Unpleasant    | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Pleasant    |
| 7.)  | Immoral       | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Moral       |
| 8.)  | Inconsiderate | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Considerate |
| 9.)  | Tense         | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Relaxed     |
| 10.) | Insecure      | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Secure      |
| 11.) | Disloyal      | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Loyal       |
| 12.) | Cold          | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Warm        |
| 13.) | Insincere     | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Sincere     |
| 14.) | Unemotional   | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Emotional   |
| 15.) | Undesirable   | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Desirable   |
| 16.) | Impulsive     | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Cautious    |
| 17.) | Immature      | 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 | Mature      |

18.) Intentionally Hurtful      1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7      Not Intentionally Hurtful

19.) To what extent do you identify with or relate to what the *male* character in this video clip just experienced?

0      1      2      3      4      5      6  
Do Not Identify With Him At All      Identify With Him Very Strongly



Instructions: Now we are first interested in learning your impressions of the **female character** in this video clip. Read each item below carefully, and select the number on the scale that most closely matches your immediate impressions of this person. Do not think too long about your answer. There are no right or wrong answers here.

\*\*Please rate the *female* character from this video clip on each of the following traits:

- |      |                          |                                       |                                 |
|------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1.)  | Unkind                   | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Kind                            |
| 2.)  | Unfriendly               | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Friendly                        |
| 3.)  | Dishonest                | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Honest                          |
| 4.)  | Unlikeable               | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Likeable                        |
| 5.)  | Unattractive             | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Attractive                      |
| 6.)  | Unpleasant               | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Pleasant                        |
| 7.)  | Immoral                  | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Moral                           |
| 8.)  | Inconsiderate            | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Considerate                     |
| 9.)  | Tense                    | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Relaxed                         |
| 10.) | Insecure                 | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Secure                          |
| 11.) | Disloyal                 | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Loyal                           |
| 12.) | Cold                     | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Warm                            |
| 13.) | Insincere                | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Sincere                         |
| 14.) | Unemotional              | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Emotional                       |
| 15.) | Undesirable              | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Desirable                       |
| 16.) | Impulsive                | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Cautious                        |
| 17.) | Immature                 | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Mature                          |
| 18.) | Intentionally<br>Hurtful | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 | Not<br>Intentionally<br>Hurtful |

19.) To what extent do you identify with or relate to what the *female* character in this video clip just experienced?

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Do Not Identify With Her At All							Identify With Her Very Strongly

ABOUT THIS MOVIE

20.) To what extent are you familiar, based on having seen or not having seen this movie, with the characters who were portrayed in this video clip?

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Not At All Familiar							Extremely Familiar

21.) Please indicate which of the following statements best represents what happened in this video clip?

\_\_\_\_\_ a. One person expressed romantic feelings toward a friend and those feelings *were* reciprocated.

\_\_\_\_\_ b. One person expressed romantic feelings toward a friend and those feelings *were not* reciprocated.

\_\_\_\_\_ c. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

22.) Please indicate which of the following statements best represents how you think this movie ends?

\_\_\_\_\_ a. I think that these friends eventually get together and start a romantic relationship with each other.

\_\_\_\_\_ b. I think that these friends end up just staying friends and do not start a romantic relationship with each other.

\_\_\_\_\_ c. I think that these individuals stop being friends and never become involved in a romantic relationship.

\_\_\_\_\_ d. I do not have enough information to guess about how this movie ends.

Appendix C

Personal Experiences Survey

Instructions: This survey has to do with your own, personal experiences with opposite-sex friendships. Please carefully read each item, and answer honestly.

1. How often have you wanted to develop a romantic (i.e., more than friends) relationship with an opposite-sex friend, but that friend just wanted to remain friends with you? (Please check one.)

Never \_\_\_\_\_

Once \_\_\_\_\_

2-3 times \_\_\_\_\_

4-5 times \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. To what extent did you feel each of the following emotions in these situations (when the romantic feelings you felt toward an opposite-sex friend were not reciprocated)?

**Anxious**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
 Not at All Very Much

**Guilty/Ashamed**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
 Not at All Very Much

**Depressed**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
 Not at All Very Much

**Frustrated**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Heartbroken**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Embarrassed**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Regretful**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Angry**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Sad**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

3. How often has an opposite-sex friend wanted to develop a romantic (i.e., more than friends) relationship with you, but you just wanted to remain friends with him/her? (Please check one.)

Never \_\_\_\_\_

Once \_\_\_\_\_

2-3 times \_\_\_\_\_

4-5 times \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. To what extent did you feel each of the following emotions in these situations (when the romantic feelings an opposite-sex friend felt toward you were not reciprocated)?

**Anxious**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Guilty/Ashamed**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Depressed**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Frustrated**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Heartbroken**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Embarrassed**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Regretful**

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6  
Not at All Very Much

**Angry**

Not at All 0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6 Very Much

**Sad**

Not at All 0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6 Very Much

Appendix D

Demographic Survey

Instructions: This survey asks you to provide demographic and descriptive information about yourself. Please answer honestly.

1. Please list your current age (in years). \_\_\_\_\_

2. Please mark your gender:

Male \_\_\_\_\_

Female \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your race/ethnicity? (Please check one.)

White/Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_

Black/African American \_\_\_\_\_

Hispanic/Latino(a) \_\_\_\_\_

Asian \_\_\_\_\_

Native American \_\_\_\_\_

Pacific Islander \_\_\_\_\_

Biracial/Multiracial \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your current relationship status? (Please check one.)

Not currently dating \_\_\_\_\_

Some casual dating \_\_\_\_\_

In a serious, committed relationship \_\_\_\_\_

Cohabiting/engaged/married \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. What is your sexual orientation? (Please check one.)

Heterosexual/Straight \_\_\_\_\_

Homosexual/Gay/Lesbian \_\_\_\_\_

Bisexual \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_