

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL  
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

**THE PURGATORY OF NO-REPLY**

GEORGE DOS REIS ALBA

Orientador/Advisor: Luiz Antonio Slongo, PhD

Porto Alegre

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### **THE PURGATORY OF NO-REPLY**

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**THE PURGATORY OF NO-REPLY**

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## ABSTRACT

No-replies are common in everyday life, especially when individuals interact in C2C (consumer-to-consumer) markets. When consumers participate in the marketplace and interact with sellers or other consumers, they may encounter various kinds of outcomes. Sometimes offerings may succeed, while other times they are explicitly declined. But it is also possible that offerings are met with a “cold shoulder”, where no explicit acceptance or rejection response is given. I posit that no-replies lead individuals to stronger attitudinal reactions than negative replies, because of different attributional process. Five studies in four different contexts show evidence of the effect of no-reply and demonstrate factors that influence the interpretation and the reactions after consumers do not receive replies. Study 1A shows the effect of no-reply in the online dating context, that individuals are more willing to react when facing no-reply than a negative reply. Study 1B broaden the results of the first experiment but in a context of speculated reaction from a third party instead of the participant’s own reaction. This study also controlled for gender as a potential factor. These first two studies demonstrate that self-esteem moderates the effect of no-reply on behavioral intentions. Study 2 replicates the results of the first studies, assessing individuals’ attributions and behavior immediately after to the encounter to negative and no-replies in an online car selling scenario. Study 2 reveals the mediating role of attributions on the influence of a no-reply on behavioral intentions. In study 3 participants attribute responsibility for the outcomes of an unsuccessful online house rental, showing evidence for the moderating role of locus of responsibility on behavioral intentions after unreplies. No-replies lead to higher attribution of self-responsibility to the outcome; however, company’s apologies for consumer’s no-reply overturn the effect. Finally, study 4 shows that the effect of no-replies on attributions disappears when perceived effort from the opposite party is low. The results show evidence that the higher effort is employed in replying, the higher perception of interest and quality of the offer. However, the obligation for the effort attenuates the perception of effort. As higher effort is perceived better the attributions to the offer.

**Keywords:** No-reply effect, attribution theory, consumer psychology, effort, locus of responsibility, self-esteem, apologies.

## RESUMO

Não respostas são comuns na vida cotidiana, especialmente quando as pessoas interagem em mercados C2C (consumer-to-consumer). Consumidores estão suscetíveis a diferentes desfechos sempre que oferecem algo no mercado ou estabelecem comunicação com outros consumidores e empresas. Às vezes, suas ofertas têm sucesso, às vezes elas são explicitamente rejeitadas, e outras vezes elas ficam no "vazio". Essa tese defende que não respostas levam as pessoas a reagirem de forma mais intensa do que em respostas negativas, por meio de diferentes processos de atribuição. Cinco estudos em quatro contextos diferentes trazem evidências do efeito e apresentam fatores que influenciam a interpretação e as reações à não resposta. O estudo 1A exibe o efeito da não resposta no contexto de encontros online. Ele mostra que as pessoas estão mais dispostas a mudar quando enfrentam uma não resposta do que uma resposta negativa. O estudo 1B amplia os resultados do primeiro experimento, no entanto, os participantes avaliaram uma situação envolvendo outra pessoa, ao invés de a si próprios. Este estudo também controlou o sexo da pessoa que não recebeu resposta. Além disso, os dois primeiros estudos demonstram que a autoestima modera o efeito de não resposta na intenção comportamental. O estudo 2 replica os resultados dos primeiros estudos, avaliando inferências sobre o comportamento das pessoas imediatamente após respostas negativas e não respostas frente a uma experiência malsucedida de venda de carro online. O estudo 2 revela o papel mediador do interesse percebido sobre a influência da não resposta na intenção comportamental. O estudo 3 força as pessoas a atribuírem responsabilidade pelos resultados de uma tentativa malsucedida de aluguel de casa on-line, mostrando evidências do papel moderador do locus da responsabilidade sobre a intenção comportamental após uma não resposta. Não respostas levam a uma maior atribuição de responsabilidade à outra parte, no entanto, um pedido de desculpas da empresa para a não resposta do consumidor, reverte este efeito. Finalmente, o estudo 4 mostra que o efeito da não resposta desaparece quando o esforço é controlado. Os resultados trazem evidências de que quanto maior o esforço empregado em uma resposta, maior a percepção de interesse e qualidade da oferta. No entanto, a obrigação em responder diminui a percepção de esforço da resposta. Quanto maior esforço percebido, maior a atribuição de interesse.

**Palavras-chave: Efeito da não-resposta, teoria da atribuição, psicologia do consumo, esforço, locus de responsabilidade, auto-estima, pedido de desculpas.**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Consider the following scenario: A man meets a woman at a bar on a Saturday, talking, dancing, drinking and having a good time. They then share their Facebook information and agree to have a date later on. Tuesday afternoon, he sends a message to invite her for dinner. He is notified that the invitation is received and read hours ago but he has not received a response yet. What conclusion is he likely to draw? Is she not interested in further interactions with him? And if she had at least replied to him, even if she had rejected his invitation, would he feel or react differently?

Simple events like that just show that individuals are truly social creatures (Molden, Lucas, Gardner, Dean, & Knowles, 2009) and we rapidly develop affiliations in the most minimally social circumstances (Brewer, 1979). During the course of life, consumers engage in many interactions where other people explicitly decline their offers or simply provide no response. While we have seen abundance of research on individuals reaction to rejections (Murray, Griffin, Rose & Bellavia, 2003, Gyurak & Ayduk, 2007, Molden, Lucas, Gardner, Dean, & Knowles, 2009), less is known about how consumers react to such scenarios of no-replies. As the booming of the online C2C (consumer-to-consumer) markets provide more opportunities for consumers to interact with each other for several reasons but also provide a platform for such situations of no-replies. Interestingly, although an obviously negative reply (e.g., a clear rejection) should normally be evaluated as more negatively than an ambiguous no-reply, I propose that individuals may in fact prefer a negative response to a no-reply, as illustrated in the dating scenario above. I hypothesize that, even the concrete utility from negative and no-replies are equal, they lead to different interpretation processes and reactions. Therefore, this research aims to provide insights into the nature of attributions and behavioral intentions that take place in no-reply situations. How do individuals judge and react to no-replies compared to a negative reply? What are the moderating factors to such reactions?

To answer these questions, I ground my research in the attribution theory, a popular framework for understanding the interpretation of other's behavior. Attribution theory posits that people search for causes of events, especially when outcomes are negative or unexpected. Specifically, I draw from research on correspondent inference theory (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Davis, 1965), which is a more narrow approach of attributions than traditional attribution theory, and from Harold Kelley (1967), which emphasizes the inferences made about another's

intentions and dispositions from the other's actions. I seek to provide an account of how individuals behave over the attributional causes they made about a no-reply.

Based on three assumptions of attribution theory, I argue that individuals are likely to form more negative inferences about a no-reply as opposed to a negative reply. Specifically, research on attribution theory has demonstrated that 1) extreme or non-common behaviors such as socially undesirable acts are more likely to be attributed to dispositions (i.e., to the character of the actor, rather than the situation) (Erickson & Krull 1999; Kelly 1967); 2) individuals assign different locus of causality depending on the beliefs of responsibility from multiple causal agents (Folkes, 1988); and 3) effort can change evaluations and choices (Aronson & Mills 1959; Weiner 1974), leading consumers to perceive a causal relationship between effort and quality (Kruger, Wirtz, Van Boven, & Altermatt, 2004).

Causal explanations play an important role in decision making because it leads people to alternative courses of action (Kelley, 1973). Hence, the behavioral consequences of attribution theory is germane to the analysis of consumer decision making (Mizersky, Golden & Kernan, 1979). This dissertation provides five main contributions to the existing literature. First, contrary to conventional knowledge I argue and demonstrate that no-replies generate stronger negative attributions and behavioral consequences than negative replies, which expands the current understanding in attribution theory. Based on several studies, I study the no-reply effect and its underlying process. First, I demonstrate that consumers are more willing to change offers when facing no-replies. Second, consumers derive more value from explicit rejection than from no-replies because they perceive that repliers invest more effort in the on-going interaction. Third, consumers attribute more responsibility to themselves when they received a no-reply vs. a negative reply. Fourth, consumers attribute that the other party has more interest (a proxy for quality) in an offer when they reply negatively vs. no-reply because of the perceived effort put into replying. Finally, effort is perceived as a proxy for quality/interest only when repliers are not obligated to reply. I also show the moderating role of self-esteem when individuals face a no-reply. I showcase the no-reply effect over four different online consumer interactions: dating, car selling, lodging rental and job applications.

Although my empirical context is limited to online interactions, from a theoretical standpoint, the findings should be generalizable to a wider context. The mechanisms I investigate are important to better understand how individuals interpret and react when they (or their offers)

are rejected in different ways. Declining or ignoring others take place in wider contexts beyond the internet, but given the growth of communication technology, it is easier to witness and document such behaviors in an online setting. In the past, people had to physically ignore others if they did not want to provide a reply, literally turning the “cold shoulder”. We hold that no-replies are commonly present in many modern online C2C interactions, such as dating platforms (e. g., Match.com, Tinder, Happn), classifieds websites (e.g., Craigslist) and traveler hosting websites (e. g., Couchsurfing, Airbnb).

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter reviews the foundation of attribution theory and its implication for consumer behavior, and discusses its potential link to the no-reply phenomenon..

### 2.1 ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Conventionally, attribution theory posits that everyone is a naïve psychologist, trying to use common-sense principles to build a picture of their social environment which guides their reactions to it (Heider 1958). Indeed, the cognitive task of establishing sufficient reason for an action involves processing available information or making assumptions about the links between stable individual dispositions and observed action (Jones & Davis, 1965).

Through perception, we come to recognize the world around us, a world made up of things and people and events (Heider, 1958). Many of these events are the actions of other individuals. Jones and Davis (1965) state that an act is seen as a polar response which reflects some degree of personal choice on the part of the actor. When we observe an action (or an inaction), we ascribe possible attributions to it. Lacking direct knowledge of the causal chain, the observer is clearly motivated to infer linkages to better order, organize, and thus understand the environment (Smith & Hunt, 1978). Armed with this knowledge, individuals are better able to predict and control the events that affect one's life and behave in line with the attributional processes (Smith & Hunt, 1978). Regarding the no-reply effect, I argue that attribution theory leads to different interpretations of two seemingly similar courses of actions, explicit rejection and no-reply whose objective utility values appear very similar.

Heider (1958) put forward two main ideas that became influential and are relevant for this research: 1) **internal attributions**, the process of assigning causes to some internal characteristic, rather than outside forces and 2) **external attributions**, the process of assigning causes to situations outside a person's control, rather than some internal characteristic. Attribution theory is a theory about how individuals make causal explanations, about how they answer questions beginning with "why?" It deals with the information they use in making causal inferences, and what they do with this information to answer causal questions (Kelley, 1973). But why this constant pursuit of "why"?

White (1959) suggests that it could be the principle of mastery, a familiar motivational attribute that make us want to know, that is, to understand the environment, to penetrate ourselves and our surroundings. For obvious reasons, it is absolutely functional to know why an event has occurred. As Kelley (1971) stated, “The attributor is not simply an attributor, a seeker after knowledge; his latent goal in attaining knowledge is that of effective management of himself and his environment”. Attribution theory does not deal with real “whys” of the actors, it deals with the “whys” other individuals infer to them. Attribution theory allows researchers to find patterns in casual inferences. Although the real causes are relevant, many times they account less for individuals’ reactions to another’s behavior.

The core of attribution theory comes from the period between the 1950s and the 1970s. Fritz Heider, Edward Jones and Keith Davis, and finally Harold Kelley’s are the undisputed founders of attribution theory. Heider (1958) became influential regarding the internal vs. external attribution process. Jones and Davis (1965) help us understand the process of making an internal attribution. They proposed that we draw on five main sources of information from other’s acts: freedom of choice, intentionality, social desirability, hedonistic relevance and personal impact. Harold Kelley (1971) developed a logical model for judging whether a particular behavior should be attributed to some characteristic (internal attribution) of the person or the environment (external attribution). Kelley believed that there were three types of causal information which influenced our judgment: consensus, distinctiveness and consistency.

As Sparkman and Locander (1980) suggest, although both correspondent inference (Jones and Davis, 1965) and the four-dimension model (Kelley, 1971) are derived from Heider's (1958) concept of perceived causality, the theories were developed with different goals. Correspondent inference theory deals with inferences that are made about the actor whose behavior is observed and Kelley’s model deals with the inferences made about the environment in which the actor is behaving (Jones & McGillis 1976; Kelley 1967).

Malle (2011) stated that even after 50 years of development in attribution theory, we must acknowledge that traditional formulations of attribution theory either focused too narrowly on inferences of stable traits (following Jones & Davis, 1965) or oversimplified the complex nature of behavior explanations (following Kelley, 1967). Besides, sometimes, people’s explanations of behavior cannot be properly understood when categorized as “person” or “situation” causes (Malle,

2011). Rather, they fall into complex cognitive interactions of reasons leading to different interpretations and reactions.

Finally, the fundamental assumption of Heider that humans spontaneously explain behavioral and social events has led to many insights in the social sciences, including consumer behavior. However, consumer research has apparently ignored new venues for attribution theory. Most research is more than 30 years old and focused on product evaluations (antecedents of causal inferences) and product satisfaction (consequences of causal inferences). I argue that attribution theory can continue to help us understand many modern consumption process. As attribution theory focuses on the universal concern with explanation (Weiner, 2000), potential still exists for attribution theory to explain the consequences of phenomenal causality in consumer behavior.

## 2.2 ATTRIBUTION THEORY IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

Imagine the scenario of a consumer called Bob smelling bad at work. Individuals can attribute many explanations for this observation, many of which are related to consumption scenarios: 1) He has run to work; 2) his deodorant is ineffective; 3) Bob failed to use the proper amount of deodorant; 4) Bob has bad hygiene habits. Obviously, information and knowledge about the specific event will help individuals with the attributional process.

It is clear that attribution theory is not only of use and interest to social psychologists, but to those in other branches of psychology and in related disciplines as well (Weiner, 2000), like consumer research. Many authors agree that causal inference theory can be meaningfully applied to marketing problems (Settle & Golden, 1974; Burnkrant, 1974; Hansen & Scott, 1976; Golden, 1977) and its applicability has been somewhat approached in consumer research. Although most attribution theory research has been conducted in social psychology, Settle and Golden (1974) advocated that the theory appears to be well suited to the study of consumer behavior. Consumer researchers have drawn on attribution theory to address product failure explanations (Folkes, 1984), advertising effectiveness (Settle & Golden, 1974; Sparkman & Locander, 1980), promotional messages (Smith & Hunt, 1978), consumer satisfaction (Oliver & DeSbarbo, 1988) and interpersonal influence (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977).



Sparkman and Locander (1980) evaluated how context, content and source credibility influence the attribution process for behavior. They have shown evidence that attributions can be changed by the advertisement's context. Settle and Golden (1974) indicated that varying advertising claims make them more superior and believable to consumers, through consumer attributional process. Smith and Hunt (1978) have shown that consumers evoke attributions when processing promotional messages, evidenced by product claim attributions in promotional situations. Oliver and DeSbarbo (1988) analyzed the attributional process from the standpoint that outcomes can be construed as successes or failures, and consumers may infer different loci of causality from these outcomes. In the consumer satisfaction domain, they stated that the source of the cause effects how attributions are made.

Most consumers are not critically analytical of their own feelings and behaviors, but simply ask why an outcome was unsatisfying, whether it will happen again, and who, if anyone, is responsible for outcome of events. Attribution theory addresses these and other common thoughts, an array of typical but important affects, and how thinking and emotion together influence behavior (Weiner, 2000).

It is important to mention that the consumer's behavior is informational input for the attribution processes for observers (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977), who are often consumers too. Sometimes, these observing consumers attribute an actor's behavior to the true feelings or dispositions, and sometimes they attribute it to external environmental factors (Smith & Hunt, 1978). These differences in attributional processes will lead to unequal judgments about the acting consumer and these judgments shape the observer's actions with respect to the acting consumer (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977), leading them to alternative courses of action (Kelley, 1973). In turn, the observer's actions may directly effect the actor's behavior (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977).

What attribution dimensions are salient to post stimuli evaluation? Weiner's early conceptualization (1985) employed three attributional dimensions that have been used in most marketing studies: locus of causality, controllability, and stability,. Recently, however, Weiner (2000) suggest that attributions about responsibility and stability are the most salient for understanding such reactions. Furthermore, stability is one attributional dimension and responsibility, however, seems to incorporate both controllability and locus of causality. From a consumer's perspective, the issue is to assign responsibility for the obtained outcome. Clearly, the locus of causality (who has caused the failure) is an important part of responsibility. But so too is

controllability, the degree of control that the causal party had on the circumstances (Tsiros, Mittal, & Ross, 2004).

As mentioned earlier, the advantage of this classification system is that stability, locus, and controllability have been linked to behavioral consequences. Based on previous research, the three causal dimensions influence several clusters of consumer responses: (1) expectancy reactions, (2) marketplace equity reactions, and (3) anger reactions (Folkes, 1984).

Folkes (1987) found that, in the context of product/service failure, the more failures are deemed controllable and stable, the greater is one's intention to repeat the interaction. In this dissertation, I investigate the two dimensions of responsibility from Wiener's approach. First, I show how the presence or absence of replies could change the perceived locus of causality. Second, as perceived effort is a factor that helps individuals to assess controllability (Morales, 2005; Kirmani & Wright, 1989), I highlight how effort moderates the attributional process.

## 2.3 EFFORT AND ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Research has shown that extra effort can change evaluations and choices (Aronson & Mills 1959; Weiner 1974). In addition, effort is an important variable in several attribution theory scenarios (Kirmani & Wright, 1989). Attribution theory suggests that consumers perceive a causal relationship between effort and product/service quality. Consequently, they tend to reward general effort (Morales, 2005).

Effort is considered one of the main controllable behaviors (Morales, 2005). Weiner's (1986) research indicates that perceived effort is a prominent factor in individuals' prediction of success or failure. Therefore, effort makes individuals perceive others as more likely to succeed, in jobs such as studying for an exam (Morales, 2005), allocating cognitive resources on a task (Bem, 1972) or spending money in advertising (Kirmani & Wright, 1989). These feelings trigger better judgments, which lead to different behavioral responses than when no effort is perceived.

In this research, similar to Morales' (2005) work, the reply (or no-reply) is the outcome that first leads individuals to engage in an attributional search that results in an assessment of controllability (effort recognition). Effort is seen as a factor that individuals control internally and that varies situationally (Kirmani & Wright, 1989). The perception of controllability invokes

emotional responses, and these emotions motivate (or do not) people to take action (Morales, 2005). The full attributional process would be a sequence of consumers seeing the reply as an effort by the replier, thereby inferring that the replier perceives quality from the offer/ad/profile, leading consumers to lower behavioral intentions to improve the offering, compared to when no effort or quality is perceived. On the other hand, no-reply would be perceived as low quality or lack of interest from the replier, leading to high behavioral intentions.

This hypothesis is consistent with Kruger et al. (2004), who use effort as a heuristic for quality. The more effort invested in an object, the better is the assumed quality. Kirmani and Wright (1989) argue that individuals naturally make an attribution from effort to quality in marketing contexts and Kruger et al. (2004) explain that sometimes quality can be difficult to determine: The monetary value of a reply or the quality of a feedback can be difficult qualities to assess. And just as availability in simulated mental sampling is a proxy for objective probabilistic frequency (availability bias), effort is generally a reliable predictor of perceived quality (Kruger et al, 2004). Aronson and Mills' (1959) early work is consistent with this assumption. For example, one would expect persons who travel a great distance to see a movie to be more impressed with it than those who see the same movie at a neighborhood theater. So, the greater the perceived effort, the better they were assumed to be. That is most people's default attribution (Kirmani & Wright, 1989).

## 2.4 NO-REPLY AND SELF-ESTEEM

In this section, I discuss the next tenant of my theorization, which is in regard of the impact of no-reply on self-esteem. Among the numerous ways in which experiences of social exclusion might be psychologically distinct, one that Molden et al. (2009) proposed can have particularly far-reaching implications for my research is how explicitly such an exclusion is conveyed. When consumers are unreplied or negative replied, they face a kind of social exclusion. Molden et al. (2009) suggest a rejection vs. ignoring typology a conceptualization that is relevant for the negative vs. no-reply typology. Negative reply is explicit and directly communicated as being rejected and no-reply is more implicit and the communication is only indirect, as being ignored. Furthermore, decisions to reply negatively or do not reply can each be inspired by an almost infinite variety of reasons and lead to different responses. Although there are several distinctions that can be made

between being rejected and being ignored, Molden et al. (2009) makes a critical argument that the unique type of social failure that individuals feel is signaled by each of these experiences. Following this line of thinking, I propose that a negative response and a no-reply signal different levels of effort and it will impact the attributional process.

Regarding self-esteem, some evidence indicates that it plays a role in the interpretation of social exclusion/rejection. People with low self-esteem show a specific vulnerability to social rejection and heightened sensitivity for detecting rejection (Murray, Griffin, Rose & Bellavia, 2003). Moreover, they are inclined to motivate individuals to act in ways that minimize rejection (Gyurak & Ayduk, 2007). In contrast, high self-esteem individuals would rationalize any esteem-threatening decision less than low self-esteem individuals (Steele, Spencer & Lynch, 1993). As a no-reply might be perceived as a stronger rejection than a negative reply, low self-esteem individuals might undergo in higher levels of causal attribution and consequently higher behavioral intentions than high self-esteem individuals when their offerings are met with no-replies. Therefore, I expect an interaction between reply and self-esteem.

### **3 OVERVIEW OF STUDIES**

Five experiments document the attributional process and behavioral intentions caused by no-replies. Across these experiments, I show evidence that, counterintuitively, a no-reply is generally perceived as more negative and generate stronger behavior consequences than a negative reply. I used an online dating scenario in both studies 1A and 1B, where I show that a no-reply leads to a greater willingness to react than negative reply conditions. I also show that the effect is present for observers of an interaction. In addition, individuals with higher self-esteem display greater difference when reacting to a no-reply and negative reply than their counterparts with lower self-esteems. Study 1B also shows that the effect is gender dependent in an online dating environment. For women, the presence/absence and the nature (positive/negative) of response have no impact on behavioral intentions. In study 2, using a car selling simulation through Craigslist, I show that a no-reply from a potential buyer leads to a bigger price discount offered by the seller compared to an explicit negative reply, which I posit is due to a lower perception of interest from buyers. In study 3, participants were asked to attribute responsibility for the outcomes of an unsuccessful online house rental offering, showing evidence for the moderating role of locus of responsibility on behavioral intentions after receiving no-reply. No-replies lead to higher attribution of self-responsibility to the outcome but a company's apologies for not replying to a consumer overturn the effect. Finally, Study 4 shows that the effect of no-reply on attributions disappears when perceived effort from repliers is low. The results show that as long as effort is employed on replying, there is a higher perception of interest and quality of the offer. I also show that obligation for the effort of replying attenuates the perception of effort.

## **4 STUDY 1A**

The first study consisted of three conditions designed to show that no-replies elicit stronger behavioral intentions than negative replies. The experiment assessed participants' reactions in an online dating scenario from a hypothetical interaction on a location-based app similar to Tinder. Participants were asked to imagine that they were matched with someone. They were then randomly assigned to one of the three conditions (no-reply, negative reply, positive reply). Thereafter, they answer a series questions regarding their attitude and behavioral intentions which constituted the main dependent variables.

### **4.1 METHOD**

#### **4.1.1 Participants and Design**

Participants were 115 workers no older than 34 years (73 males) recruited from Amazon M-Turk who participated in the experiment for 0.20 US Dollars. The design was a one-factor (response type), three-level (no-reply, negative reply, positive reply) between-subjects design. Mean and median self-esteem scores from the sample were 26.78 and 26, respectively.

#### **4.1.2 Procedure and Stimuli**

Workers registered with Amazon M-Turk agreed to participate in a five minute study about online dating experiences. Participants were redirected to a Qualtrics survey and they received an unique code at the end of the survey to validate their participation which qualified them for the compensation. Participants in all three conditions were told to imagine that they have started using an online dating app for finding a dating partner for themselves. They were asked to assume that they provided their picture and personal information, and the app matched them with someone whose picture and personal information they had liked. They were then told to imagine that they have sent a message to this match and got a confirmation that the person has received their message

and checked their picture and personal information. This scenario was the same across all conditions. Next, they were randomly assigned into one of the three conditions and read:

After your message...

*the person does not reply to you (no-reply condition)*

*the person replies to you saying that s/he is not interested in you (negative reply)*

*the person replies to you and you start chatting (positive reply)*

After reading one of the prompts above, participants were asked to indicate their likelihood to change their picture and revise their personal information in the app (7-point Likert scale from 1-very unlikely to 7-very likely). After completing these questions, participants reported gender and age and to checked any marital status that applied (single, married, have boy/girlfriend, currently in a happy relationship). Participants older than 34 were excluded from the final sample, because, according to recent research, they are less familiar with online dating apps (Pew Research, 2015). This research has also shown that individuals between 18 and 34 years are the biggest users of these apps. Participants also answered the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (1979). The scale produces a score ranging from 10 to 40:

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.\*
2. At times, I think I am no good at all.
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.\*
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.\*
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I certainly feel useless at times.
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.\*
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.\*

## 4.2 RESULTS

### 4.2.1 Manipulation Checks and Control Tests

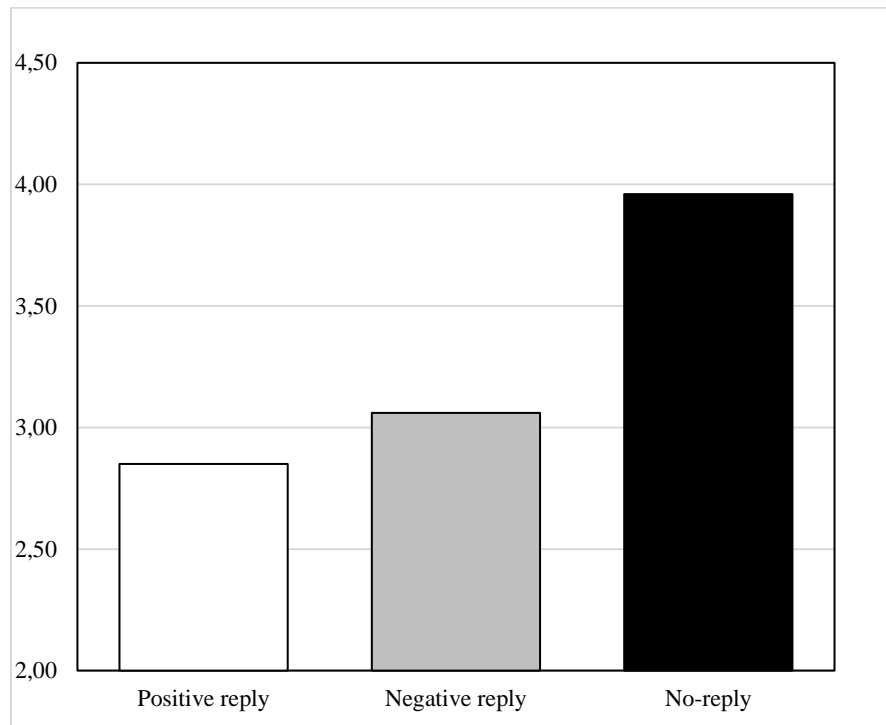
Participants did not show any difference in self-esteem across three experimental conditions [positive reply ( $M = 28.17$ ), negative reply ( $M = 30.11$ ) and no-reply condition ( $M = 27.35$ ;  $F(2,112) = 1.75$ ,  $p > 0.05$ )]. When asked if they have any specific problems with the survey, only two participants reported minor issues, but they were not removed from sample.

### 4.2.2 Analysis

A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of difference response received on subsequent behavioral intentions. A significant difference in the likelihood to review personal informational on the online dating app was observed ( $F(2,112) = 4.48$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Post-hoc tests showed significant differences between the no reply ( $M = 3.94$ ), negative reply ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $t(67) = 2.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and positive reply conditions compared to the no-reply condition ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $t(78) = 2.98$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Surprisingly, no differences were found between positive and negative reply. The effect of response conditions on the likelihood to change a personal picture on the online dating app was not significant, however the pattern of the results was the same. In this study, I considered the likelihood to review personal information as an indicator of behavioral intentions.

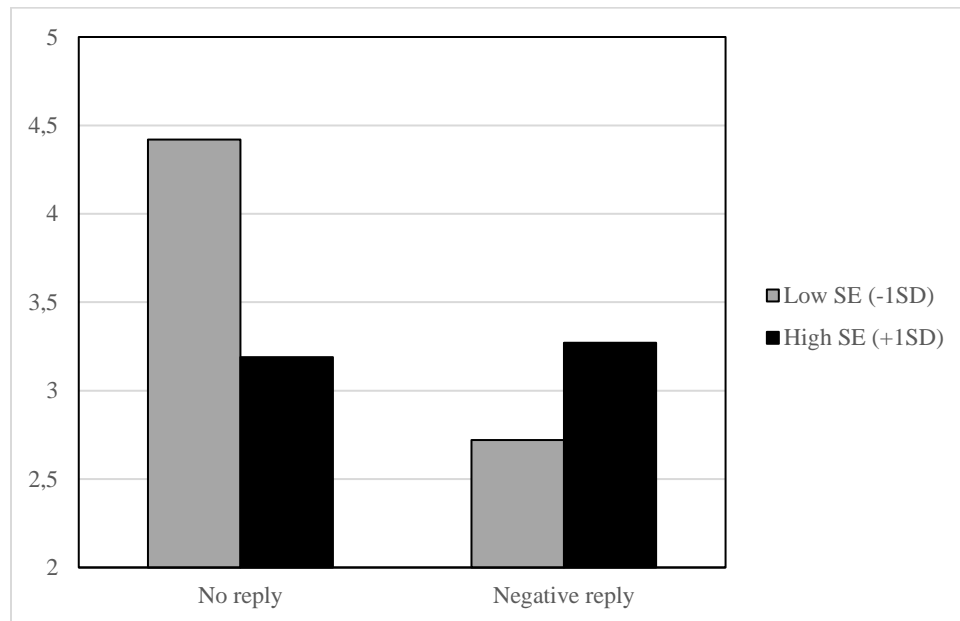


**Figure 1 - Likelihood of revise personal information (Study 1A)**

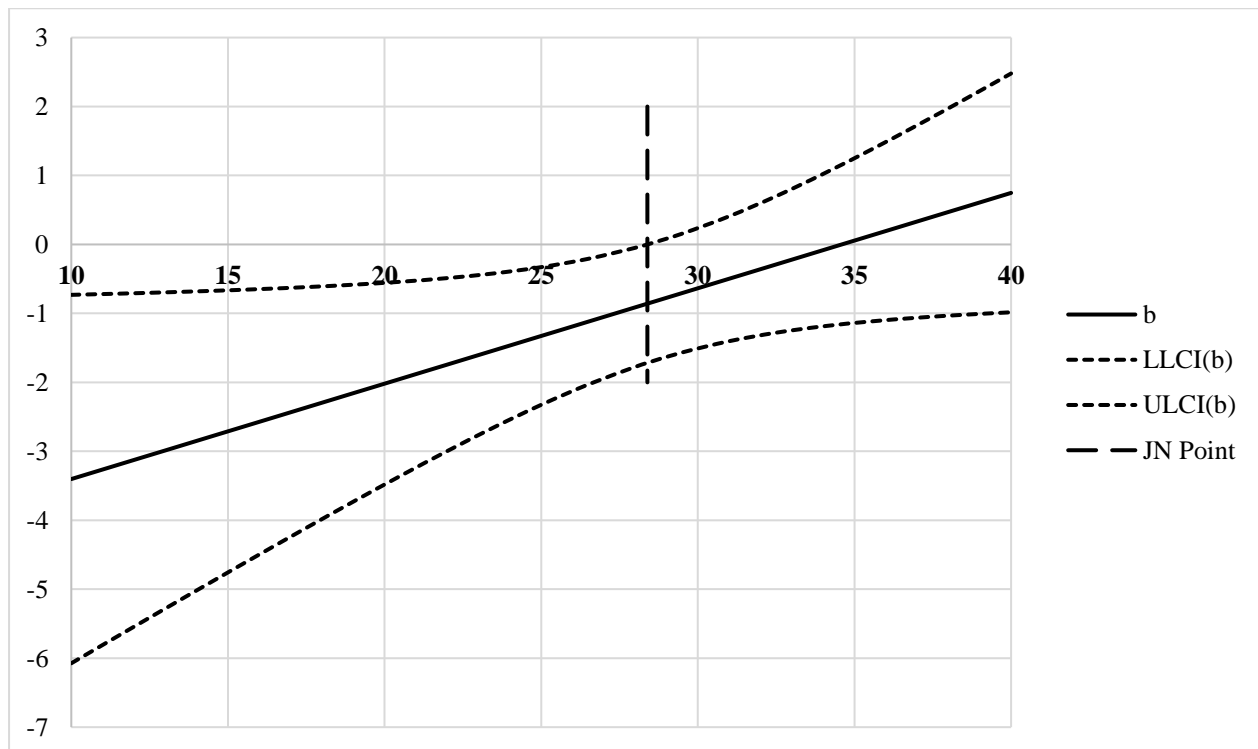


There is a significant interaction between self-esteem and attitudinal reaction for the no-reply vs. negative reply condition ( $t(65) = 2.05, p < 0.05$ ). Self-esteem moderates the effect of reply on the likelihood to update personal information. I conducted a spotlight and a floodlight analysis, following Hayes and Matthes' (2009) procedure. First, I plotted the data considering focal points of the moderator ( $\pm$  one standard deviation on mean), assuming that there are low and high self-esteem people. Second, I plotted the data considering the full range of the moderator, assuming that there are many levels of self-esteem.

**Figure 2 - Likelihood of revise personal information (Spotlight analysis) (Study 1A)**



**Figure 3 - Likelihood of revise personal information (Floodlight Analysis) (Study 1A)**



Spotlight analysis indicated that a no-reply causes stronger behavioral intentions for low self-esteem individuals. For high self-esteem individuals, there is no difference between the effect of negative vs. no-reply on behavioral intentions. Floodlight analysis indicated the higher a participant's self-esteem is, the smaller the difference is between the negative and no-reply conditions. To decompose this interaction, I used the Johnson–Neyman technique to identify the range(s) of self-esteem scores for which the simple effect of the manipulation was significant. This analysis revealed that a no-reply produces stronger behavioral intentions only for participants with self-esteem scores below 29 and the effect intensifies as the self-esteem decreases.

### 4.3 DISCUSSION

The results of the study 1A show that a no-reply produces stronger behavioral intentions than a negative reply. I show that consumers are more willing to take actions when facing no-replies vs. negative replies. However, as the initial results showcase an interesting phenomenon, further evidence is needed to solidify our understanding of in the effect documented in Study 1A, as well as an investigation of the underlying process of the phenomenon. I will further discuss the results of this experiment on the final chapter of study 1B. Study 1B was designed to broaden the findings of this first experiment of no-reply effect in a different setting. Study 1B aims to examine the extent the effect from an observer's perspective instead of the participant's own behavioral tendency, which may be prone to demand effect bias.

## **5 STUDY 1B**

This study aims to broaden the scope of the first experiment findings. Study 1B assumes a similar procedure from study 1A but employs two significant changes. First, participants evaluated a situation involving another person, rather than themselves. This design aimed to strengthen the power of the no-reply effect, extending to a situation where the demand effect of one's impression management motivation would not contaminate the response to the survey questions. Second, I manipulated the gender of the target person who did (not) receive the reply. It is plausible that individuals might have different interpretations for rejection suffered by men and women. This speculation is consistent with evolutionary psychology theories, which state that men and women have different mating strategies. In humans, whereas females have the higher reproductive rate, females, not males, are the predominant sexual competitors (Clutton-Brock & Vincent, 1991). Bailey et al. (1994) argue that the typical male will, more often, try to complete a reproductive venture before the typical female and because this is a dating context, it is prudent to test both target gender. The experiment assessed participants' attribution and suggested behavior to the target person immediately after the hypothetical interaction. Participants had to imagine that a male/female target was matched with someone and received different response type (no-reply, negative reply, positive reply). Thereafter, they answer the main dependent variables, that were the same variables measured in the first study.

### **5.1 METHOD**

#### **5.1.1 Participants and Design**

Two-hundred and seventy-one students from University of Miami (131 males) aged from 18 to 32 years old ( $M = 20$  years) participated in the experiment in exchange for an extra credit. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the conditions in a 2 (target gender: male vs. female) by 3 (response type: no-reply, negative reply, positive reply) between-subjects design. Mean and median self-esteem scores from the sample were 30.21 and 30, respectively.

### 5.1.2 Procedure and stimuli

Upon entering the lab, participants logged in with their lab identification and were redirected to a Qualtrics survey. The procedures were very similar to Study 1A. Participants in all conditions were told to imagine that a person named Alex had started using an online dating app to look for a dating partner. Similar to study 1A, participants were asked to assume that Alex provided her/his picture and personal information, and the app matched her/him with someone whose profile pictures and personal information she/he. Then, they were told to imagine that Alex sent a message to her/his match and got a confirmation that the person has received the message, and had checked her/his picture and personal information. All participants across experimental conditions read the same story above. Then, participants read one of the following messages based on their random assignment of experiment conditions:

After Alex sent the message...

1. the person does not reply to her/him (no-reply condition)
2. the person replies to her/him saying that s/he is not interested in her/him (negative reply)
3. the person replies to her/him and they start chatting (positive reply)

When the participants finished reading the manipulations, they were asked whether they agreed that Alex should change her/his profile picture and revise her/his personal information in the app (7-point Likert scale from 1=strongly disagree unlikely to 7=strongly agree). Then, participants reported their own gender and age, and marital status (single, married, have boy/girlfriend, currently in a happy relationship). As for study 1A, participants also completed the Rosenberg self-esteem scale, which produced a composite scores ranging from 10 to 40.

## 5.2 RESULTS

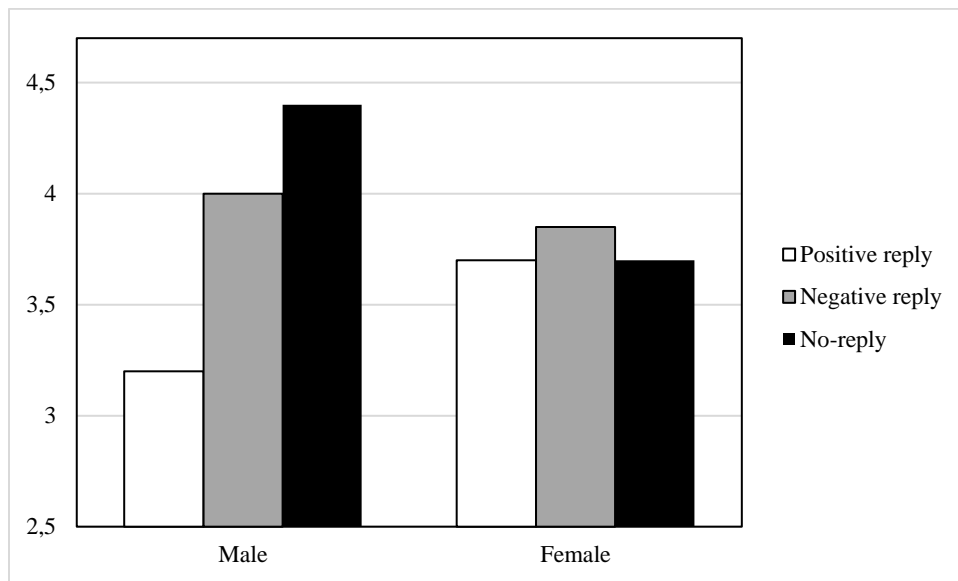
### 5.2.1 Manipulation Checks and Control Tests

Participants showed no differences on the self-esteem scale across the response type conditions [positive reply ( $M = 30.39$ ), negative reply ( $M = 29.96$ ) and no-reply condition ( $M = 30.28$ ;  $F(2,268) = 0.15$ ,  $p > 0.05$ )]. Study 1B was conducted in the lab with a similar scenario that was used in study 1A and no relevant technical issues were identified. Male and female participants didn't show any differences in the dependent variables and self-esteem scores ( $M_{\text{male}} = 28.37$ ;  $M_{\text{female}} = 28.79$ ).

### 5.2.2 Analysis

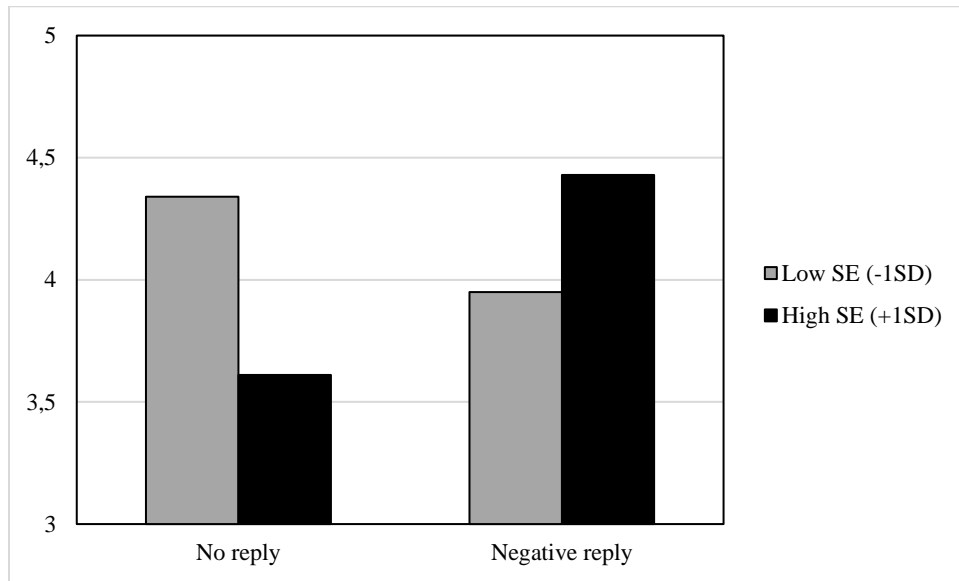
A two-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of reply and the target gender on behavioral intentions. There was a significant main effect of response type on behavioral intention measures: likelihood to revise personal information ( $F(2,265) = 5.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and likelihood to change personal picture ( $F(2,265) = 2.99$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). But there was no main effect of target gender on the dependent variables. However there were a significant interactions between the effects of response type and target gender on: 1) the likelihood to revise personal information on the online dating app ( $F(2,265) = 5.48$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and the likelihood to change personal picture on the online dating app ( $F(2,265) = 2.86$ ,  $p = 0.06$ ). Post-hoc analysis shows that the effect of response type on the likelihood of changing a profile picture is only significant when the main character of the fictitious scenario, who initiated contact to the other party, is male ( $F(2,131) = 5.092$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). On the other hand, when the main character is female, the effect disappears ( $F(2,134) = 0.203$ , n.s.).

**Figure 4 - Likelihood to recommend picture change by target gender (Study 1B)**

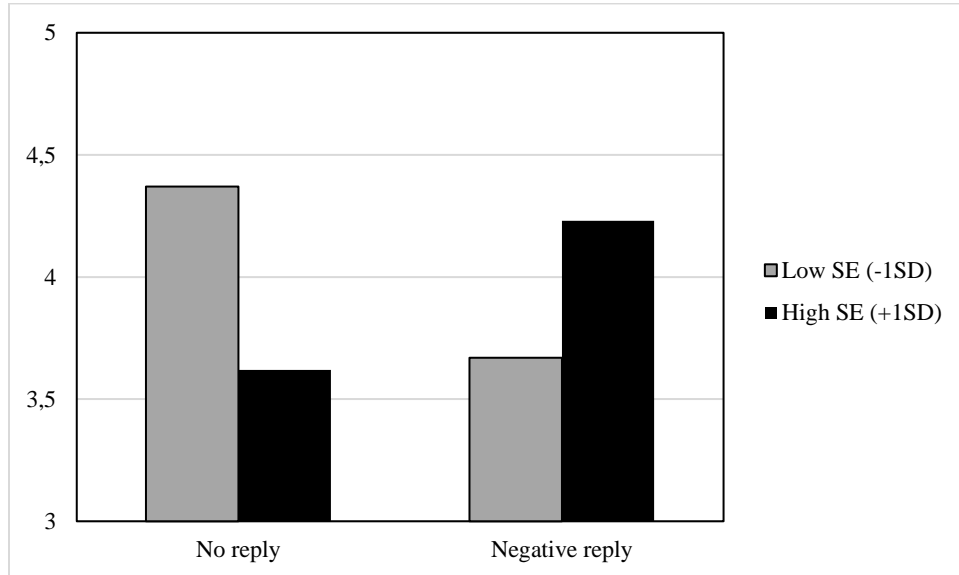


Replicating the pattern of Study 1A, there is a significant interaction between self-esteem and behavioral intention recommendations for no-reply vs negative reply. This time, however, the interaction was significant for two measures: personal information revision ( $t(183) = 2.28, p < 0.05$ ) and profile picture change ( $t(183) = 2.55, p < 0.05$ ). Self-esteem moderates the effect of reply on how individuals suggest that others should revise personal information or change their profile picture when facing a no-reply or negative reply. Again, I conducted a spotlight and a floodlight analysis, following Hayes and Matthes' (2009) procedure. First, I plotted the data considering focal points of the moderator ( $\pm$  one standard deviation on mean), assuming that there are low and high self-esteem individuals. Second, I plotted the data considering the full range of the moderator, assuming there are many levels of self-esteem.

**Figure 5 - Likelihood to recommend personal information revision (Spotlight analysis) (1B)**



**Figure 6 - Likelihood to recommend picture change (Spotlight analysis) (1B)**

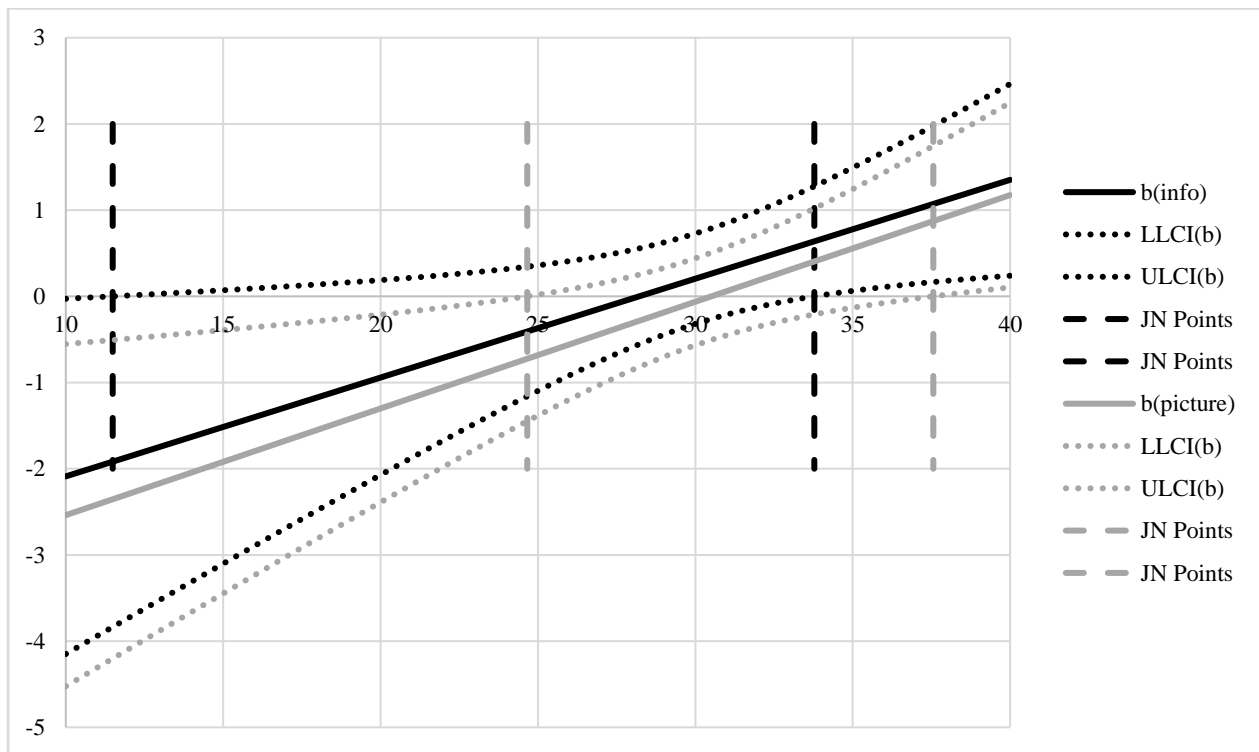


Study 1A has shown that a no-reply causes stronger behavioral intentions on low self-esteem individuals. Study 1B shows that participants with lower self-esteem are more likely to recommend change in the absence of response from the other party [change profile picture ( $t(183)$



= 1.96,  $p < 0.05$ )] in comparison to participants with higher self-esteem [personal profile review ( $t(183) = 2.19$ ,  $p < 0.05$ )]. Floodlight analysis indicated the higher the self-esteem of a participant is, the less likely s/he is to behave differently between a negative reply scenario and a no-reply scenario. To decompose this interaction, I used the Johnson–Neyman technique to identify the range(s) of self-esteem scores for which the simple effect of the manipulation was significant. This analysis revealed that participants with self-esteem scores lower than 12 or higher than 33 are less likely to recommend different courses action across scenarios of negative-reply and no-reply, but participants whose self-esteem scores are between 12 and 33 are more likely to recommend revision of profile picture/ personal statement in the absence of reply from the other party, in comparison to the negative-reply scenario. In addition, a no-reply produces weaker picture change recommendations for participants with self-esteem scores below 25 and stronger picture change recommendations for participants with self-esteem scores above 37. The effect intensifies as the self-esteem score increases and decreases, respectively of these scores.

**Figure 7 - Recommend personal info revision & picture change (Floodlight Analysis) (1B)**



### 5.3 DISCUSSION

Study 1B augments the findings from Study 1A by showing evidence that the effect found hold not only when the participant made hypothetical decisions regarding themselves but also when they acted as third-person spectators. This finding is consistent with Calder and Brunkrant's (1977) argument that observers might share similar attribution processes.

Regarding gender issues and, consistent with an evolutionary explanation about mating strategies of men and women, the no-reply effect stood only for those who evaluated a scenario experienced by a man. In both studies, self-esteem was a moderator of the impact of reply on behavioral intentions. The lower the self-esteem, the lower the likelihood to take actions in the absence of replies. As individuals with low self-esteem show heightened sensitivity in detecting rejection (Murray, Griffin, Rose & Bellavia, 2003) and are motivated to act in ways that minimize rejection (Gyurak & Ayduk, 2007), they displayed stronger reaction to no-replies. In summary, no-reply is more likely to motivate individuals with low self-esteem than high esteem..

In general, the results from the first two studies supports the hypothesis that a no-reply causes stronger behavioral intentions than explicit positive or negative responses. When participants received a no-reply they were more willing to take actions themselves (study 1A) or recommend action to others (study 1B) than when they received negative replies. As these experiments present robust evidence for the hypothesized effect, it is also important to explore the process that underlies the phenomenon (Kelley, 1973). I argue that effect is driven by the fact that individuals different attributions to a no-reply and negative reply, even if the objective outcome utilities are identical. In this way, differences in the attributional process should lead to unequal judgments and these judgments shape consumers' actions (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977). Hence, investigating the attributions made by consumers who received a no-reply should enhance our understanding of the effect of no-replies.

The next two studies will show how and when no-replies produce strong behavioral intentions in consumers. The studies are placed in two different online consumer environments: car selling and lodging rental. Through attribution theory, I will explain the no-reply effect in many different settings. Study e will show the mediation role of attribution on the effect of a no-reply on behavior intention.

## **6 STUDY 2**

The second study assessed participants' attributions and behavior intentions immediately after exposure to negative and no-replies in an exchange regarding a hypothetical ad posted on Craisglist (USA online classifieds). Participants had to imagine that they would like to sell a car to other consumers on Craigslist. Craigslist, like eBay, has become very popular among consumers who want to trade goods with other consumers. Nowadays, about 60 million Americans use Craigslist every month (Craigslist, 2014) in comparison to eBay's 128 million user-base worldwide (Business Wire, 2014). I have chosen this context because both buyers and sellings are more likely to engage in direct communications via Craigslist than eBay.

### **6.1 METHOD**

#### **6.1.1 Participants and Design**

Two hundred fifty-six students from the University of Miami (64 males) from 18 to 35 years old ( $M = 21$  years) participated in the experiment in exchange for course credit. The experiment employed single-factor between-subjects design, wherein the buyers' replies were manipulated (no-reply vs. negative reply vs. two controls).

#### **6.1.2 Procedure and Stimuli**

Similar technologies from earlier studies were used in Study 2. Participants were told a cover story that the study attempted to collect information about individual perception of an ad. All participants were exposed to the same ad. We have chosen the most popular car offered in Miami/Atlanta Craigslists, with the most popular specifications and the average price for 2014: a 2003 Honda Accord EX Sedan 4-doors, listed at 5,500 dollars.

I showed six pictures (appendix) and described the car as in a very good condition, following the Kelley's Blue Book vehicle condition requirements: "This car is free of any major

defects and runs great. This vehicle has a clean Title History. The paint, body and interior have only minor blemishes, and there are no major mechanical problems. There is no rust on this car and the tires have considerable life left.” The car specifications were also presented: “Odometer: 128,000, 4-Cyl, VTEC, 2.4 Liter, FWD, ABS (4-Wheel), Power Steering, Tilt Wheel, Alloy Wheels, Dual and Side Air Bags, Automatic Transmission, Air Conditioning, Power Windows, Power Door Locks, Cruise Control, AM/FM Stereo and CD player.” After being exposed to the ad, participants were randomly assigned to one of experiment conditions and read one of the following messages:

1. Pre-listing control: Imagine that you are going to post this ad online soon.
2. Post-listing control: Imagine that you posted the ad and after one week, you still didn't sell the car.
3. Negative reply condition: Imagine that after one week, five people contacted you and took a look at the car. You showed it to these potential buyers and asked them to give you a reply by calling or texting. All buyers agreed with the request. As agreed, they gave you a reply. However, all five told you that they did not want to buy the car.
4. No-reply condition: Imagine that after one week, five people contacted you and took a look at the car. You showed it to these potential buyers and asked them to give you a reply by call or text message. All buyers agreed with the request. However, none of them replied or contacted you later on.

After reading the messages above, participants were asked to attribute how interested participants were in the car (except for pre-listing control condition). Then, they were asked to predict how likely the car would be successfully sold if the ad would be listed again and set a new price for the relisting of the car on a sliding scale ranging from \$4,000 to \$7,000. Information about their interest, knowledge and familiarity with cars in general were solicited at the end of the experiment, followed by attention check questions.

## 6.2 RESULTS

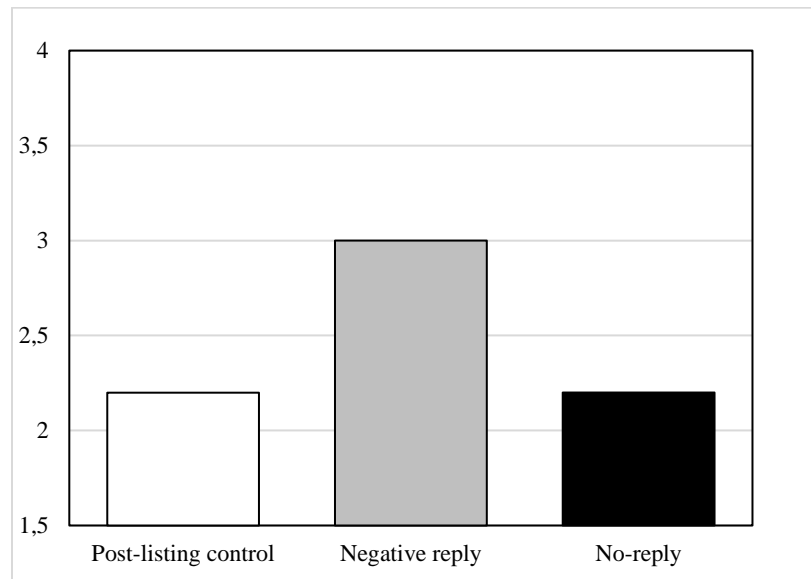
### 6.2.1 Manipulation Checks and Control Tests

In total, ten subjects from the initial 256 sample were removed due technical problems or poor understanding of the procedures (as observed in the problem report question). and 202 were retained in the final sample after attention check. In addition, I removed forty-four subjects who failed to answer the manipulation check: “How many buyers contacted you and took a look on the car?” Control conditions should answer “0” or “not applicable” and experimental conditions should answer “5”. Across all conditions, participants did not differ in familiarity ( $F(3,198) = 0.55$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), interest ( $F(3,198) = 1.44$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), and knowledge of cars ( $F(3,198) = 0.80$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

### 6.2.2 Analysis

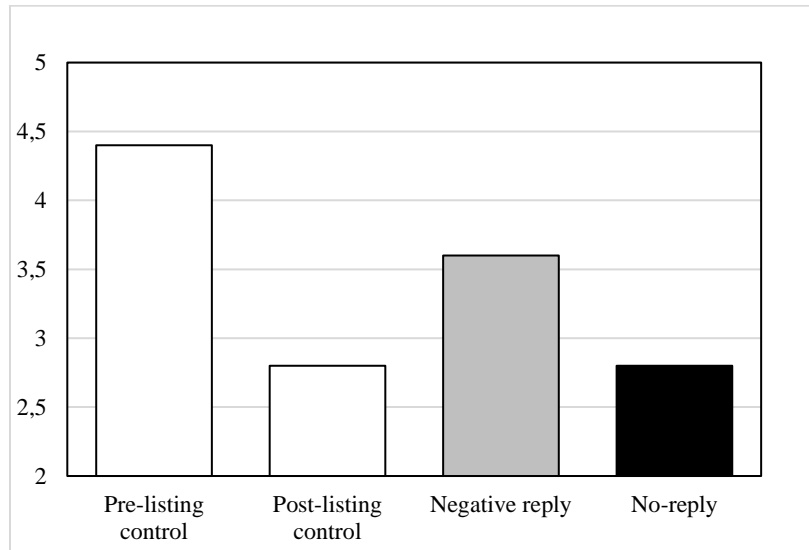
Participants who did not receive any reply after being contacted by 5 potential buyers ( $M_{\text{no-reply}} = 2.2$ ) evaluated the interest of the buyers the same as participants who did not receive buyer contact at all ( $M_{\text{post-listing control}} = 2.2$ ,  $t(97) = 0.533$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), and both evaluated lower buyer interest than participants with negative replies from the same potential buyers ( $M_{\text{negative}} = 3.0$ ;  $t(108) = 3.154$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $t(111) = 2.628$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This question was not shown to participants in the pre-listing control condition because they did not have any information about past performance of the ad.

**Figure 8 - Consumer's attributions (perceived buyers' interest) (Study 2)**



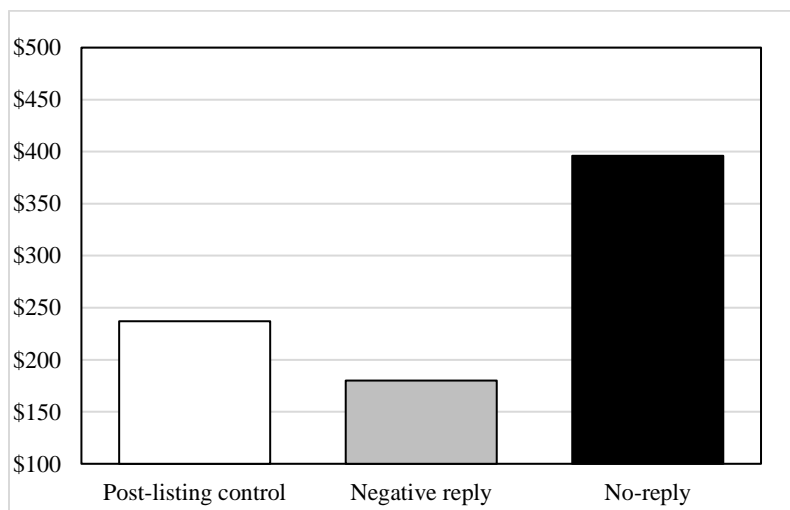
One-way ANOVA examined participants' predictions of the likelihood of selling the car if the ad was to be listed again. The estimated selling likelihood differed across conditions ( $F(3,198) = 9.988, p < 0.001$ ), and post-hoc analysis revealed that the estimations by participants in the pre-listing control condition ( $M_{\text{pre-listing}} = 4.4$ ) were higher than those by participants in the post-listing control condition ( $M_{\text{post-listing}} = 2.8; t(90) = 4.471, p < 0.001$ ), no-reply condition ( $M_{\text{no-reply}} = 2.8; t(87) = 4.246, p < 0.001$ ) and negative reply condition ( $M_{\text{negative reply}} = 3.6; t(101) = 2.231, p < 0.05$ ). Participants who did not receive buyer contact at all and participants in the no-reply condition did not differ ( $t(97) = 0.105, p > 0.05$ ), but both evaluated the likelihood of selling the car significantly lower than participants in the negative reply condition ( $t(111) = 2.886, p < 0.01$ );  $t(108) = 2.690, p < 0.01$ ; respectively).

**Figure 9 - Selling likelihood (Study 2)**



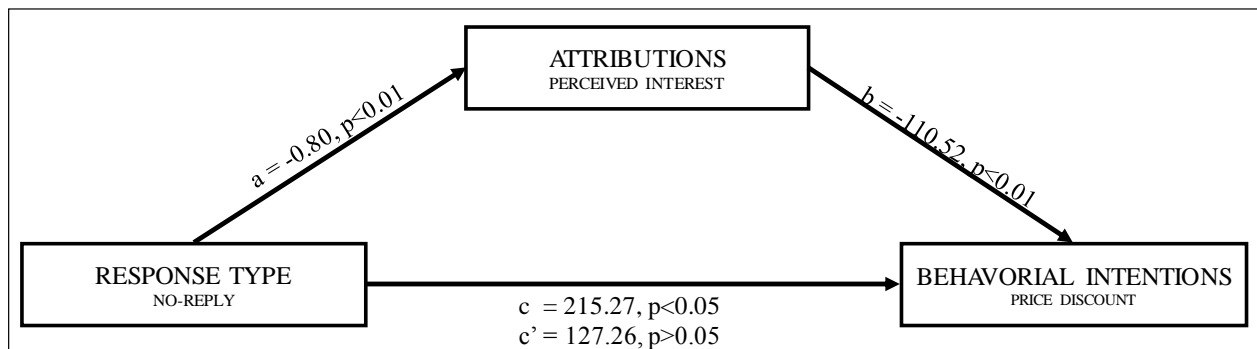
Finally, a one-way ANOVA was used to compare the relisting price given by participants. There was no significant difference between control and negative reply conditions. However, further analysis indicated that participants in the no-reply condition ( $M_{\text{no-reply}} = -\text{US}\$396$ ) offered a greater price reduction than participants in the negative reply condition ( $M_{\text{negative-reply}} = -\text{US}\$180$ ;  $t(108) = 1.979$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), consistent with my main hypothesis that no-reply generates stronger behavioral intentions.

**Figure 10 - Average price discount (US dollars) (Study 2)**



I have reasoned that the relationship between no-replies and behavioral intentions to set lower relisting prices is mediated by the attribution of buyer's interest. As Figure 11 illustrates, the regression coefficient between no-reply and perceived interest was negative and statistically significant, as was the regression coefficient between perceived interest and behavioral intentions. The standardized indirect effect was  $(-.80)(-110,52) = 88.01$ . I tested the significance of this indirect effect using bootstrapping procedures. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of 1,000 bootstrapped samples (Zhao, Lynch and Chen 2010)), and the 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects adjusting for bias in the bootstrapped sampling distributions relative to the actual sampling distribution (bias corrected method). The 95% confidence interval ranged from 22.02 to 173.78. Thus, the indirect effect was confidently different from zero. In this way, a no-reply was no longer a significant predictor of behavioral intentions after controlling for the mediator, perceived interest, consistent with full mediation. In this study, a no-reply was associated with approximately US\$88 dollars higher price discount than a negative reply as mediated by the attribution of interest.

**Figure 11 - Mediation of attributions on the effect of no-reply on behavioral intentions (Study 2)**



### 6.3 DISCUSSION

First of all, Study 2 replicated the results of the studies 1A and 1B, showing the effect of no-reply on behavioral intentions, with price discount as a more realistic metric to evidence real-world consequences of no-reply phenomenon. Secondly, this study shows the process how the no-



reply effect is transferred to stronger behavioral intentions. Based on these results, I argue that a negative reply may not produce behavioral intentions as high as no-reply, because it does not generate strong attributions as a no-reply does. Mediation analysis demonstrated that, after controlling for the attributional process, a no-reply was no longer a significant predictor of behavioral intentions. Attribution theory helps us to recognize the world around us, a world made up of things, people and events (Heider, 1958). Consistent with Smith and Hunt, (1978), when individuals observe an inaction, such as a no-reply, they come up with possible correspondence inferences about it, like perceived interest. The attribution process fills the gap of the direct knowledge in the causal chain.

The participants are not mere attributors, but their latent goal is attaining knowledge to observed behaviors (Kelley, 1971). In Study 2, I show that the differences in responses to a no-reply vs. negative reply is because of how individuals interpretate the stimulus. The observer needs to infer linkages to better organize the environment (Smith & Hunt, 1978), giving them a better course of action (Kelley, 1973). Settle and Golden (1974) advocated the use of attribution theory in consumer behavior and I propose that no-reply effect is one example where the attribution theory appears to be well-suited to the study of consumer behavior.

Some may argue that the ultimate outcomes of no-replies and negative-replies appear to be the same: a failure to establish an exchange or communication. In practical terms, one may not get a date and a car may not get sold. However, individuals need failure explanations (Folkes, 1984) to guide their future actions, and attribution theory is a way to show how this happens. Oliver and DeSbarbo's (1988) attributional process analysis has shown how scenario outcomes can be construed as successes or failures. However, I advance these findings, showing that different kinds of outcomes with the same utility value (no-reply vs. negative reply) can be construed as failures with different values for future actions, leading to unequal behavior intentions.

Once I have showed evidence that attribution theory explains the no-reply effect, I tested, in Study 3, one of the important factors of the attribution theory as a moderator. Weiner (2000) and Folkes (1984) linked locus of causality to behavioral consequences, as people attribute responsibility to events and behave accordingly. The next study explores the locus of causality as a moderator of the no-reply. Then, the last study approaches the power of effort as a cue for individuals to make stronger attributions to a no-reply than a negative reply. Weiner's (1986) research indicates that perceived effort is a prominent factor in people's interpretations of success

or failure and I expand this finding by investigating the influence of these interpretations of effort on different kinds of failure (no-reply vs. negative reply).

## 7 STUDY 3

The third study assessed attribution of locus of causality, and behavioral intentions immediately after exposure to a negative and no-reply from a guest as the participants assumed the role of a guest who requested a booking for a beach house on the vacation rental listing service Airbnb. Airbnb was founded in 2008 and is an online community marketplace for people to list, discover, and book accommodations around the world. Airbnb connects hosts and guests in more than 34,000 cities and 190 countries. Participants were told to imagine they were to rent a vacation lodging property and they contacted the host. Participants were assigned to conditions where they received a negative reply vs. a no-reply. Furthermore, those who were assigned to the no-reply condition were assigned (or not) to conditions where they were told the leasing company upheld different kinds of customer service policies, where one group were told that company apologized for host's misconduct and the other group were told nothing. This design is driven by both a theoretically goal and a practical driven goal: 1) to investigate the moderating role of locus of causality (who do consumers attribute to be more responsible for the failure?). Weiner (2000) pointed out that, as a part of attributional process, consumers assessing responsibility for events, and locus of causality may have an influence on behavioral consequences (Folkes, 1984); 2) to investigate the impact of company customer service policy. I expect that this company practice can attenuate the consequences of no-reply behavior, even though there is no theory to support that assumption.

### 7.1 METHOD

#### 7.1.1 Participants and Design

Participants were 104 workers (47 males) ranging from 18 to 59 years old ( $M = 30$  years) from Amazon M-Turk who participated in the experiment for 0.10 US Dollars. The design was 2 (response type: negative reply vs no-reply) by a 2 (company apology e-mail: yes vs. no) incomplete factorial between subjects design. The experiment employed three conditions, because the apology condition did not apply to the participants in the negative-reply condition:

**Figure 12 - Conditions (Study 3)**

Response type	Company apology e-mail	
No-reply	No	Yes
Negative-reply	No	-

### 7.1.2 Procedure and Stimuli

At the beginning of the experiment, participants were introduced to Airbnb with basic information about the leasing company: “Airbnb is a website for people to list, find and rent lodging. It has over 1,500,000 listings in 34,000 cities and 190 countries.” Secondly, participants were asked to imagine that they have already created a guest profile to use the website for lodging rental. Furthermore, they were told that Airbnb registered hosts “are free to accept or reject the guests for whom they want to rent their place. However, Airbnb policy strongly recommends hosts to quickly reply to potential guests, even if they do not have any interest in renting their place to interested guests.” The explicit statement regarding the replying policy was to create make the the scenario more salient. Thereafter, participants read a brief description and were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions, as follows:

“Imagine that you are at the Airbnb website, looking for a beach house for the summer. After searching for two days, it seems that you have found just the perfect spot. Promptly you send a message to the host showing an interest in his house. You receive a confirmation that the host has already read your message and checked your profile.”

*However, he does not reply to you (no-reply condition)*

*Later on, the host replies to you saying that he is not interested in renting his place to you (negative reply condition).*

Participants in the no-reply condition were randomly assigned to the presence or absence of a company apologies because of a guest no-reply. Those in the apologies condition were told

that they received the following e-mail from Airbnb (adapted from an original e-mail received by the author in Portuguese):

After two days, Airbnb sends you the following e-mail:

Hello,

We note that you have not received a reply from one of our registered hosts. We are sorry for this!

We always ask the hosts to reply within 24 hours, and we regularly evaluate their response rates, but sometimes it takes a little longer than we would like.

Best regards,

Airbnb team.

When the participants finished reading the manipulations, they were asked to attribute who was more responsible for the outcome of the scenario, how much Airbnb is responsible for the outcome, how likely they would send another message to the host and how much they agreed that the average host would like their Airbnb profile. A 7-point Likert scale were used in all measures.

## 7.2 RESULTS

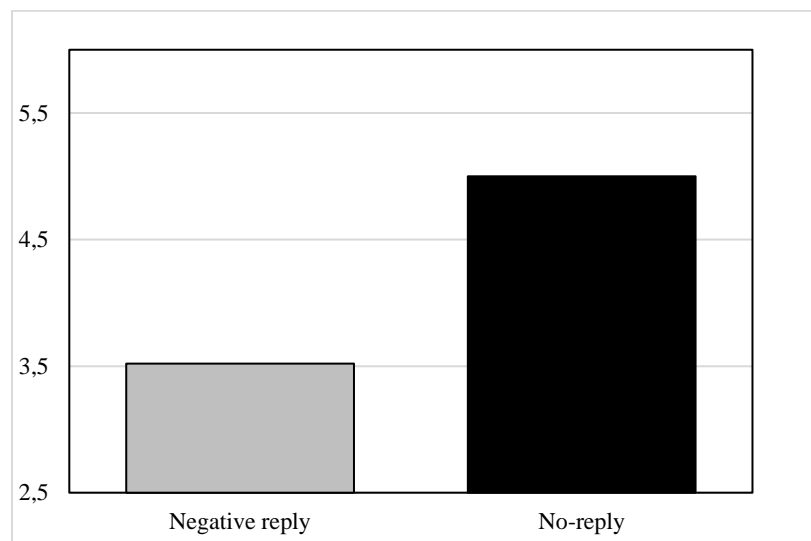
### 7.2.1 Manipulation Checks and Control Tests

Participants did not show any differences in self-esteem across the conditions of negative reply ( $M = 30.71$ ), no-reply without company apologies ( $M = 28.28$ ) and no-reply with apologies ( $M = 31.16$ ;  $F(2,101) = 1.59$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). There was no gender age bias across all main dependent variables. Finally, participants in the negative reply ( $3.61$ ), no-reply without company apologies ( $M = 3.86$ ) and no-reply with apologies ( $M = 3.61$ ) did not differ in attribution of responsibility to Airbnb ( $F(2,101) = 0.31$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), allowing the test for a difference of attribution of responsibility to guest or host.

## 7.2.2 Analysis

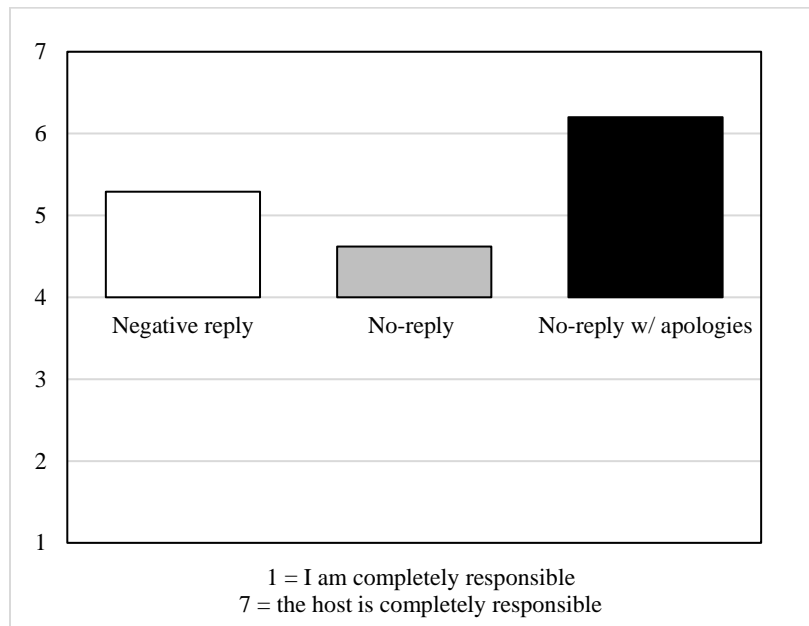
A t-test was conducted to compare the effect of reply on behavioral intentions and the results were consistent with the findings from the first three studies. Individuals who received a no-reply were more willing to send another message to the host ( $M = 5.00$ ) than those who received a negative reply ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $t(58) = 3.19$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). There was no direct effect between no-reply with company's apologies condition ( $M = 4.43$ ) and the other two conditions.

**Figure 13 – Behavioral intentions (Study 3)**



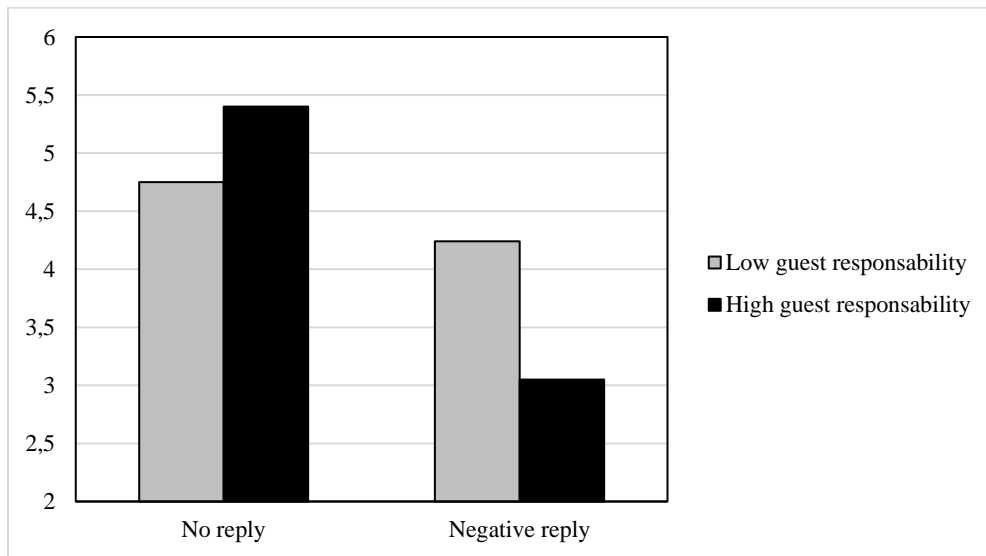
A one-way ANOVA was used to examine participants' attributions of responsibility over the outcome of the scenario. The attribution of responsibility differed across all three conditions ( $F(2,101) = 13.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and post-hoc analysis revealed that participants in the no-reply condition without apologies attributed the outcome responsibility more to themselves ( $M = 4.62$ ) than participants in the negative reply ( $M = 5.29$ ,  $t(58) = 1.98$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and no-reply with apologies ( $M = 6.20$ ,  $t(71) = 5.13$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Nevertheless, there was also a difference between participants in the negative reply and no-reply with apologies ( $t(73) = 3.31$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Figure 14 - Locus of responsibility (Study 3)**



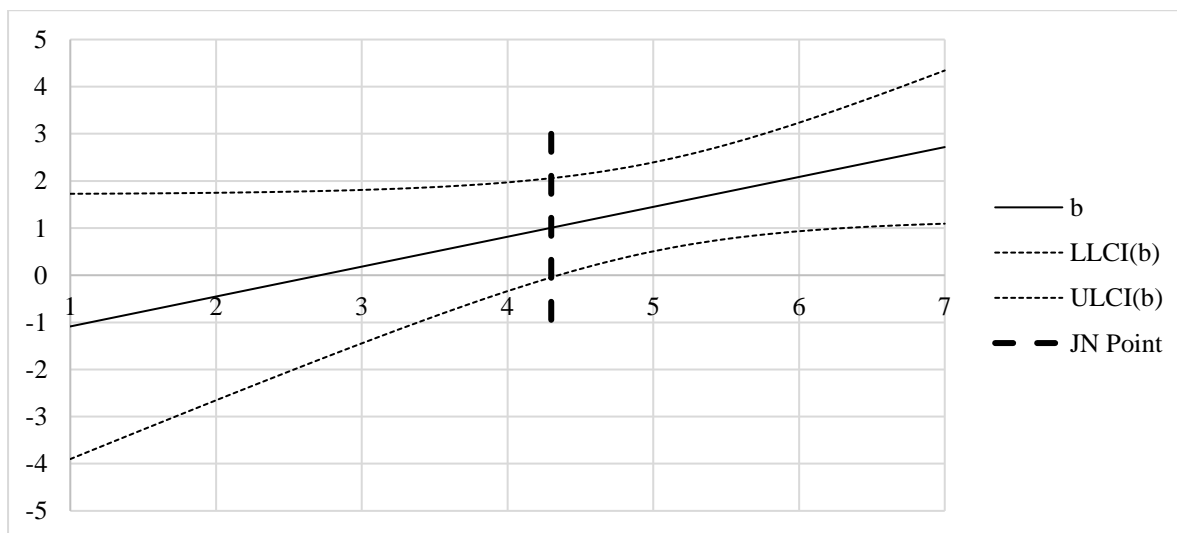
A spotlight and a floodlight analysis, following Hayes and Matthes' (2009) procedure examined the locus of responsibility as a moderator of the relation between the impact of no-reply and negative reply on behavioral intention. First, I plotted the data considering focal points of the moderator ( $\pm$  one standard deviation on mean), assuming that there are individuals who attribute more responsibility to themselves, and individuals who attribute more responsibility to host. Second, I plotted the data considering the full range of the moderator, assuming there are many levels of responsibility attribution. Spotlight analysis indicated that no-reply causes stronger behavioral intention for those who attribute more responsibility to others. Negative-reply, however, causes stronger behavior intention for those who attribute more responsibility to themselves.

**Figure 15 - Behavioral intentions (Spotlight analysis) (Study 3)**



Floodlight analysis indicated that the lower participants' attribution of responsibility to themselves is, the higher the difference becomes between the negative and no reply condition. To decompose this interaction, I used the Johnson–Neyman technique to identify the range(s) of self-esteem scores for which the simple effect of the manipulation was significant. This analysis revealed that a no-reply produces higher behavioral intentions than a negative reply as the attribution of responsibility to the guest increases (scores above the middle point of the scale).

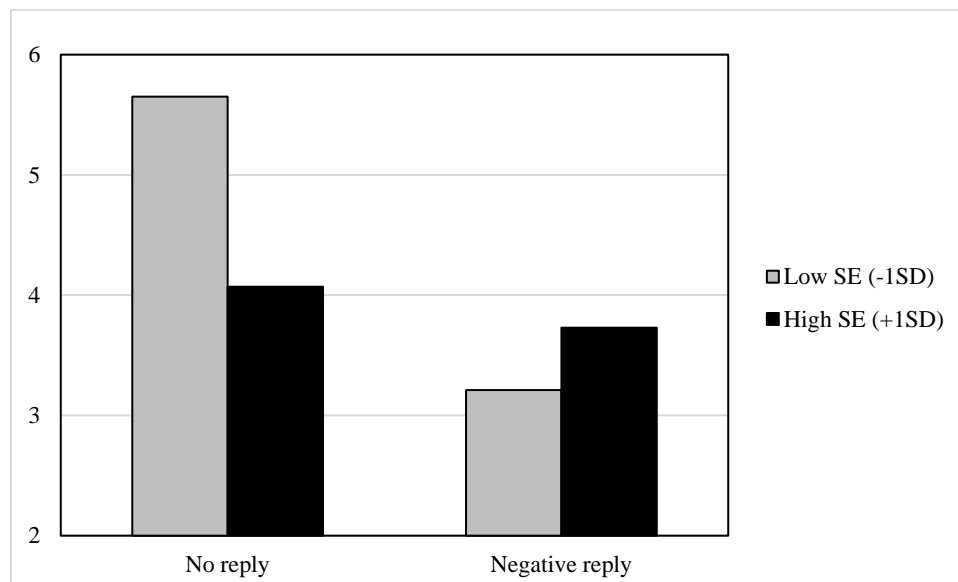
**Figure 16 - Behavioral intentions (Floodlight analysis) (Study 3)**





Replicating the pattern of Study 1A and 1B, there is a significant interaction between self-esteem and behavioral intentions for no-reply vs. negative reply ( $t(56) = 2,17, p < 0.05$ ). Self-esteem moderates the effect of reply on how individuals intend to behave when facing a no-reply or negative reply. Figure 17 shows the results of the spotlight analysis.

**Figure 17 - Behavioral intentions (Spotlight analysis) (Study 3)**



### 7.3 DISCUSSION

Weiner (2000) concluded that attributions of responsibility is one of the most salient factors for understanding consumers' reactions. In Study 3, the results regarding different loci of responsibility for the failure support my hypothesis that a no-reply produces more self-responsibility than a negative reply. On average, individuals who receive a negative reply attribute more responsibility to others and display lower behavioral intentions than those with a no-reply. It is intuitive that the more individuals feel that others are more responsible, the lower the likelihood to make changes to themselves. However it is not as intuitive that negative and no-replies cause unequal allocations of responsibility. Based on the results, I propose that the allocation of the responsibility plays a moderating role of the no-reply effect on behavioral intentions.

In study 3, I have also tested the effect of a company's apologies on the allocation of responsibility. Surprisingly, when companies apologize for users' no-replies, the effect overturns. Participants in the no-reply condition, who received this treatment, attributed more responsibility to others, than the other two conditions. I maintain that this finding is of great practical value even though the effect size is subtle. Study 3 also replicated the findings of Study 1A and 1B. Again, I show that self-esteem is a moderator of the impact of no-reply on behavioral intentions. The effect is more accentuated in low self-esteem individuals. The next study is a continuation of Study 2, as it provides explanations of why individuals make stronger attributions to a no-reply than negative reply. Study 4 aims to present evidence that no-replies generate weaker positive attributions because individuals perceive less effort than negative replies and, as Kruger et al. (2004) demonstrated, perceived effort is a heuristic for quality.

## 8 STUDY 4

The fourth study has a 2\*3 design in an attempt to show that no-reply generates stronger attributions than negative replies on individuals only when voluntary effort on replying is perceived. Participants were told to imagine that LinkedIn, a business-oriented social network website, has launched an advanced tool for job applications and recruiting of candidates. This tool would allow a candidate to search and apply to companies that are hiring. Then, they were asked to imagine that they started an application for a new job on LinkedIn. Participants were assigned to conditions where they received a no-reply vs. an automatic negative reply vs. a non-automatic negative reply. Furthermore, those who were assigned to the non-automatic negative reply condition were assigned to a 2 (level of effort: low vs. high) by 2 (obligated effort: yes vs. no) between subjects factorial design. In this study, I tested the hypothesis that individuals perceived lower interest for a no-reply than a negative reply because no-reply perceives no effort from the replier and according to Kruger et al. (2004), effort is a heuristic for quality and the more effort invested in an object the better it is deemed to be. This hypothesis is also consistent with Kirmani and Wright (1989), who argue that individuals naturally make an attribution from effort to quality in marketing contexts.

### 8.1 METHOD

#### 8.1.1 Participants and Design

Participants were 205 workers from Amazon M-Turk (78 males) from 18 to 67 years old ( $M = 35$  years) participated of the study in exchange for 0.10 US Dollars. The design was a 3 (response type: no-reply vs. automatic negative reply vs. not automatic negative reply) by 3 (effort: no vs. low vs. high) by 2 (obligated effort: no vs. yes) incomplete factorial between subjects design. The experiment employed six conditions, because low and high effort conditions do not apply to no-reply and automatic negative reply conditions and no effort condition does not apply to negative reply condition. The six conditions are summarized below:

**Figure 18 - Conditions (Study 4)**

<b>Reply</b>	No-reply	Automatic Negative reply	Negative reply	
<b>Effort Obligation</b>	<i>no effort</i>	<i>no effort</i>	<i>low effort</i>	<i>high effort</i>
	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>not obligated</i>	<i>not obligated</i>
	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>low effort</i>	<i>low effort</i>
	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>obligated</i>	<i>obligated</i>

### 8.1.2 Procedure and Stimuli

At the beginning of the experiment, participants were told that the number of companies hiring online is increasing and then read the following message:

“The e-Business Guide estimates more than 150 million people have visited the top 10 job websites annually. People search for jobs on these websites and submit their job applications online. Companies accept or reject applications after analyzing candidates’ resumes and personal information.”

Secondly, participants were told: “Linkedin, a business-oriented social network, has launched an advanced tool for recruiting candidates. This tool allows candidates to search and apply for companies that are hiring. Linkedin strongly encourages companies to quickly reply to all applicants.”

This information was introduced to enhance realism of the manipulation. Furthermore, participants had to imagine that they were looking for a new job and they registered/updated their resume and personal information on Linkedin. After a long search, they seem to have found a good job opportunity. This company was accepting applications for two weeks and would be interviewing candidates within a month. Participants were told that they submitted their application, including resume and personal information, through the Linkedin platform. Then, they got a confirmation that the company has received the application and will be in touch with them. Until here, all participants had the same information. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the following conditions:

**Condition 1 – no reply:** After a month, however, you receive no reply from the company.

**Condition 2 – automatic negative reply:** After a month, you receive an automatic reply saying that you were not selected for an interview.

**Condition 3 – negative reply (low effort):** After a month, you receive a personal reply from the company on the LinkedIn website. It says briefly you were not selected for an interview.

**Condition 4 – negative reply (high effort):** After a month, you receive a personal letter from the company that is signed by the human resources manager. The letter says you were not selected for an interview.

Participants allocated to conditions 3 and 4 were then randomly assigned into one of the following treatments:

**No obligation treatment:** Companies hiring on LinkedIn are not obligated to send a personal reply to applicants.

**Obligation treatment:** Companies hiring on LinkedIn are obligated to send a personal reply to applicants.

When the participants were done reading the manipulations, they were asked to answer about the attractiveness of their profile and estimate effort, involvement and attention paid and interest from the company on their application. A 7-point Likert scale in all measures (1= not at all to 7=very much). Lastly, participants indicated their gender, age and whether they had any technical issues during the survey.

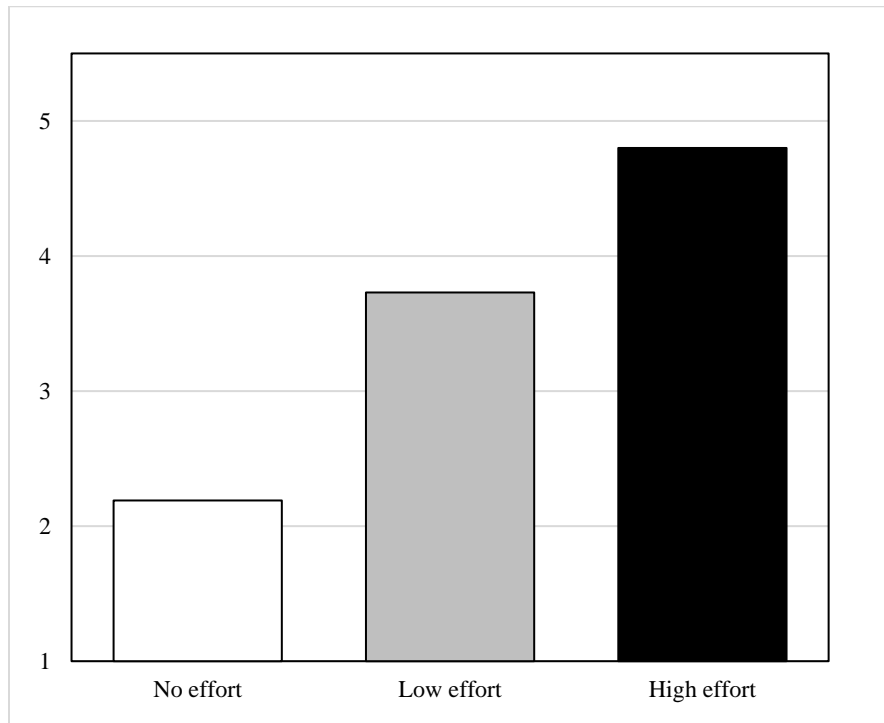
## 8.2 RESULTS

### 8.2.1 Manipulation Checks and Control Tests

As a manipulation check, I tested the perception of effort across the three levels of effort manipulation: no effort ( $M = 2.19$ ), low effort ( $M = 3.73$ ) and high effort ( $M = 4.80$ ). I collapsed no-reply and automatic negative reply conditions for the manipulation check, since there was no effort applied in any of them. Participants perceived the different levels of the effort as expected

based on the treatment conditions ( $F(2,202) = 49.93, p > 0.001$ ). Post-hoc analysis indicated significant differences across all three levels ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Figure 19 - Perceived Effort (Study 4)**

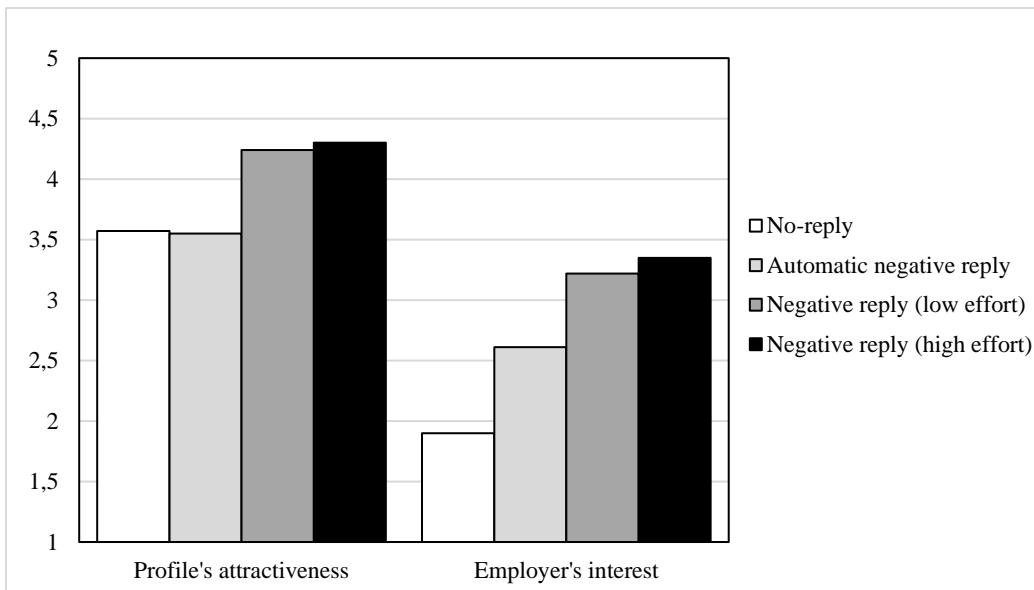


### 8.2.2 Analysis

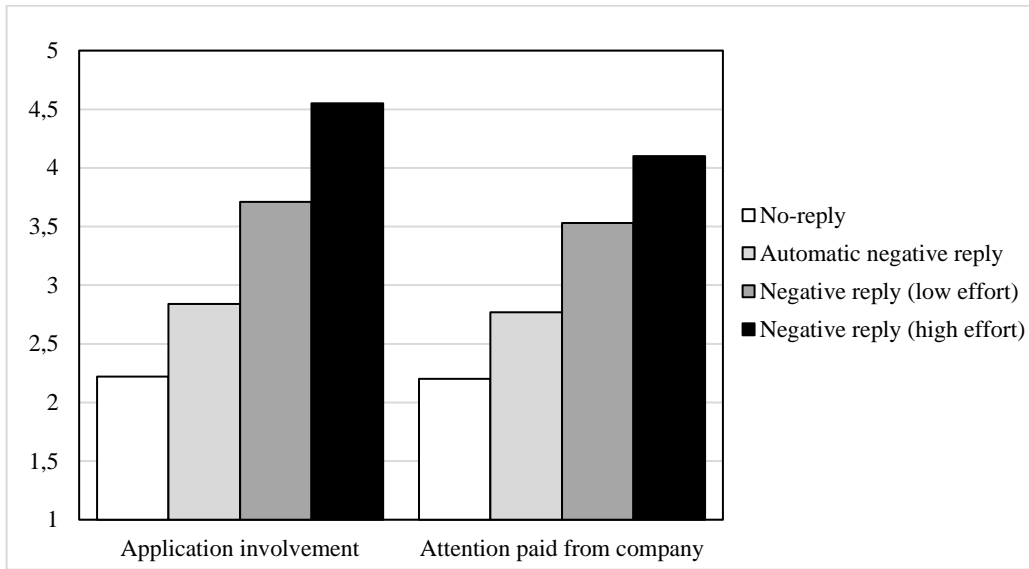
I conducted a one-way ANOVA to examine participants' attributions of attractiveness of their profile and employers' interest, involvement and attention paid to the application based on the response type and all were significant ( $F_{\text{attractiveness}}(3,201) = 3.20, p < 0.05, F_{\text{interest}}(3,201) = 10.58, p < 0.001, F_{\text{involvement}}(3,201) = 23.80, p < 0.001, F_{\text{attention}}(3,201) = 15.12, p < 0.001$ ). For attractiveness, post-hoc analysis indicated that participants in the no-reply condition ( $M = 3.57$ ) differed significantly from participants in the negative reply conditions with effort ( $M_{\text{low effort}} = 4.24, t(107) = 2.19, p < 0.05; M_{\text{high effort}} = 4.30, t(98) = 2.24, p < 0.05$ ). However, no difference was found between the no-reply condition and the automatic negative reply condition ( $M = 3.55$ ).

For employer's interest, the same pattern of results was found, except that automatic negative reply ( $M = 2.61$ ) also differed significantly from no-reply ( $M = 1.90$ ,  $t(114) = 2.93$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and from negative reply conditions with effort ( $M_{\text{low effort}} = 4.24$ ,  $t(103) = 1.96$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $M_{\text{high effort}} = 4.30$ ,  $t(94) = 2.34$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). For the other two attributions (involvement with the application and attention paid to the application), the same pattern of employer's interest results were found ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Figure 20 - People's attributions (Study 4)**

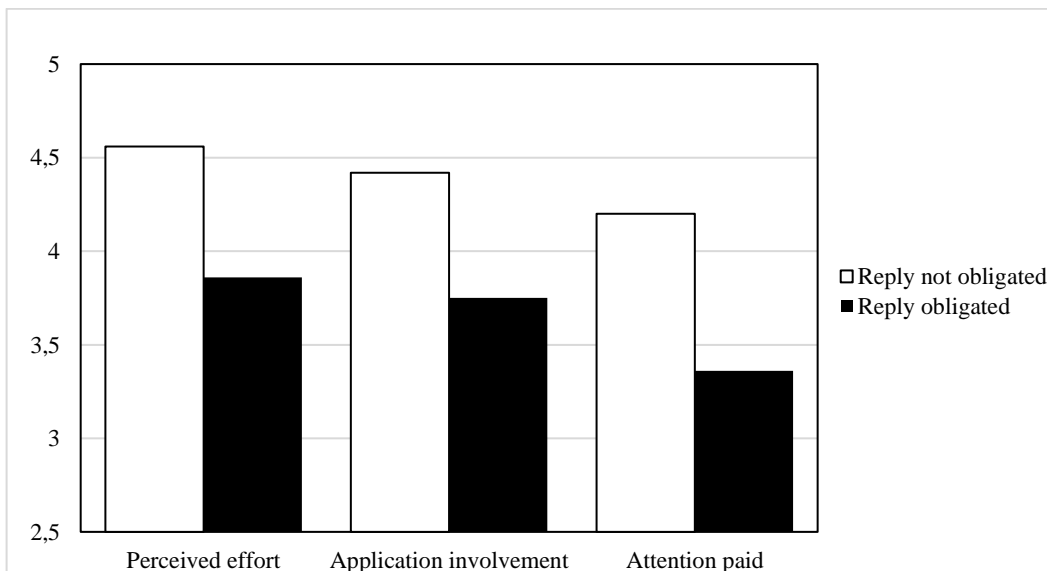


**Figure 21 - People's attributions (cont.) (Study 4)**



T-tests indicated that obligation to reply makes people attribute lower scores of perceived effort ( $M_{\text{obligation}} = 3.86$ ,  $M_{\text{no obligation}} = 4.56$ ,  $t(87) = 2.00$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), application involvement ( $M_{\text{obligation}} = 3.75$ ,  $M_{\text{no obligation}} = 4.42$ ,  $t(87) = 2.10$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and attention paid to the application ( $M_{\text{obligation}} = 3.36$ ,  $M_{\text{no obligation}} = 4.20$ ,  $t(87) = 2.51$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

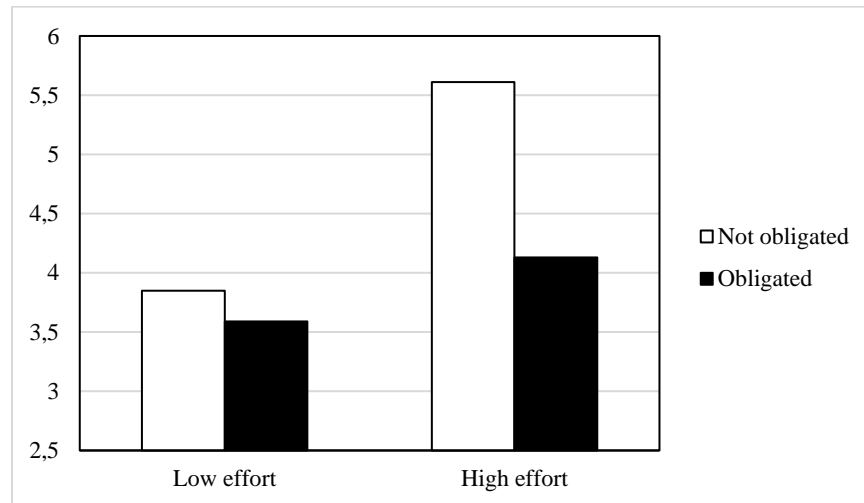
**Figure 22 - People's attributions (obligation vs. no obligation) (Study 4)**





A factorial ANOVA was conducted to test the interaction between level of effort and the obligation to reply on perceived effort. The interaction effect was significant ( $F(3,85) = 3.85$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), showing evidence that individuals perceive more effort to high effort replies, but only if is voluntary, as seen in Figure 23.

**Figure 23 - Perceived effort (Study 4)**



### 8.3 DISCUSSION

Reply (or no-reply) is a factor that could first lead individuals to engage in an attributional search. This search, as Morales (2005) points out, results in an assessment of controllability (effort recognition). Results from study 4 support the claim that perceived effort plays an important role on the attributional process. The more perceived effort, the stronger the positive attributions. These findings are consistent with Kirmani and Wright (1989), who state that the more perceived effort there is, the better an object is assumed to be. Study 4 shows that individuals do not perceive effort from a no-reply, thus affecting their attributions of interest, attractiveness, involvement and attention paid towards the offer. When individuals evaluate the attractiveness of their own profiles, they did not differ between the no-reply condition and negative condition, which demonstrating moderating role of effort in the relationship between response type and individuals attributions. Similar works have shown that extra effort can change evaluations and choices (Aronson & Mills,

1959; Weiner, 1974). On the other hand, when individuals attribute thoughts to a target, even an automatic negative reply differed from a no-reply. More research is needed, however, to theoretically understand this result. I speculate that attributions to specific targets and attributions to groups, in general (e.g, market, companies), could have different influences.

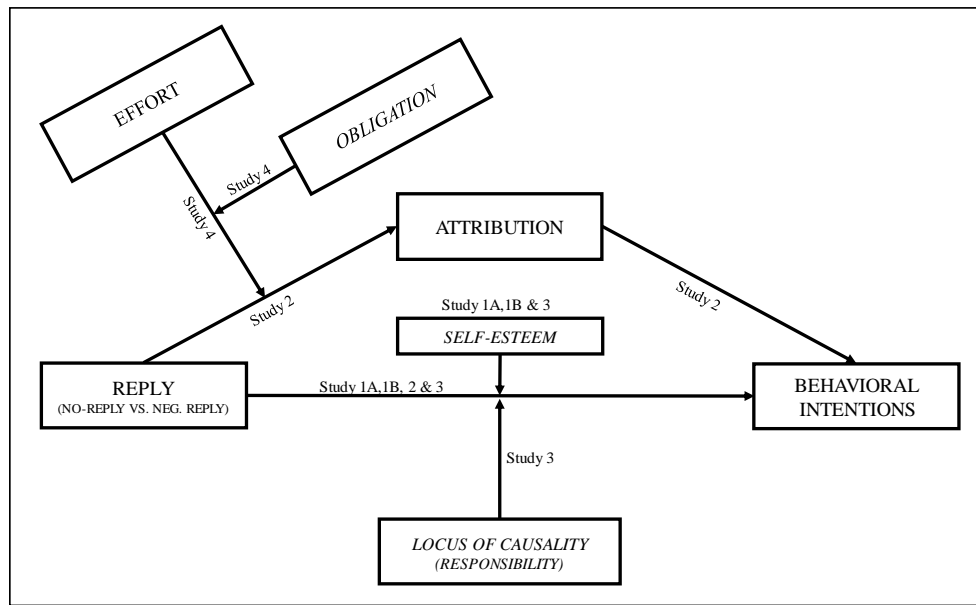
In this study, participants did not build or read any detailed information regarding the actual applicant. The answers provided were solely based on the response from the recruiting company and the overall application outcome. All participants received identical outcome (rejection). The response type that participants received varied at different levels of perceived effort from the recruiting companies. For low effort replies, participants attributed lower levels of profile attractiveness, even though they did not even see any actual profile. Related to the target company's attributions, a no-reply yielded the worst scores. Interestingly, unreplied participants attributed lower scores than participants who got negative replies, even when no effort was employed. This counterintuitive result shows the impact of a no-reply, but also provides evidence that effort cannot explain all kind of attributions individuals made when are unreplied.

I also showed the main effect of obligation to reply on the attributions. In general, individuals attributed better scores when the company's reply was voluntary. There is also an interaction between effort and obligation to reply on individuals' perceived effort. High effort is only perceived by consumers who received a voluntary reply. In this way, high effort replies are useful if they are not obligated. For low effort replies, obligation is not relevant. Further discussions are provided in the next chapter.

## 9 GENERAL DISCUSSION

Collectively, evidences from five experiments supports the hypothesis that consumers have different attributional processes for negative and no-replies, which leads to different behavioral intentions. Consumers make attribution to infer causal explanations for the response type they receive for their offerings. I explain the no-reply effect through attribution theory, including several factors such as locus of causality, effort and consumer self-esteem. Compared to a negative-reply, a no-reply increases the behavioral intentions (Studies 1A, 1B, 2 and 3), because of different attributional process (Studies 2 and 3). Individuals do not require much effort for a no-reply, which in turn is a proxy for interest or perceived attractiveness. As individuals do not perceive effort in no-replies, it generates worse attributions (Study 4), and increases behavioral intentions. This happens probably because no-replies seem to imply stronger failures than negative replies, so individuals feel the need to change something. The effect of no-reply on behavioral intentions is moderated by self-esteem and locus of causality. The lower the self-esteem, the stronger the effect of a no-reply on behavioral intentions (Studies 1A, 1B and 3) and the more responsibility consumers attribute to others, which lowers the intentions to behave (Study 3). The entire pattern of results explain these the relations are presented on Figure 24.

**Figure 24 - The no-reply effect summarized**



## 9.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Molden et al. (2009) examined how explicit, active, and direct (i.e., when one is rejected) versus implicit, passive, and indirect (i.e., when one is ignored) action/reaction differs in terms of motivations and emotions. No-replies, a form of indirect rejections and negative-replies, a form of direct rejections take place frequently in everyday life, especially in online C2C environments. When individuals face such situations, they tend to infer causal explanations (Mizersky, Golden & Kernan, 1979, Kelley, 1973), using common-sense principles to construct a picture of the social environment. These inferences guide their reactions (Heider, 1958). Attribution theory is a popular framework for understanding how individuals interpret their surroundings. Past research on attribution theory has identified factors that influence behavioral intentions over failures (e.g., Folkes, 1984; Oliver & DeSbarbo, 1988; Weiner, 2000). The attributional process includes assigning responsibility for events (Folkes, 1988; Weiner, 2000) and perceiving the effort-quality relation as a cause-effect reasoning (Morales, 2005).

This dissertation has incorporated many of these research streams under a unitary theory umbrella in an attempt to better understand the effect of a no-reply in consumer behavior. These findings integrate and qualify several previous findings from attribution theory summarized above. Moreover, I advanced from the success vs. failure perspective of attribution theory (e. g, Folkes, 1984; Oliver & DeSbarbo, 1988; Weiner's, 1986). No-replies and negative replies are both forms of a rejection from a utilities perspective. However, they evoke unequal judgments and behavioral reactions.

Following Malle (2011), it is probable that attribution theory has been forgotten for a while in consumer research, because of its narrow focus on inferences of stable traits or oversimplification of the complex nature of behavior explanations. However, I advocate in favor of Weiner's (2000) point of view, that potential still exists for attribution theory to explain the consequences of phenomenal causality in consumer behavior.

There are several streams of research to further advance the results of this dissertation. First, field experiments with real data and actual behavior measures could bring more realism to the effect and help better understand the complexity of the no-reply phenomenon. Second, testing more strategies that could make the no-reply effect collapse, like the Airbnb apologies, is also useful to bring more practical implications. Third, research should also approach the no-repliers. And the

questions I have done in the beginning of the dissertation would be similar, however the target would not be the receiver. Thereby, why do individuals choose not to reply? When they do that? And how they do that? Are the consequences of no-replies consistent with what no-repliers expect? Does the lack of effort pay back?

## 9.2 MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

From a consumer's point of view, findings from this research demonstrate that no-replies can increase behavioral intentions. These behaviors include changing or recommending changes to others because of a no-reply. They also include economic reactions, such as higher reduction of prices. For consumers, the no-reply effect is paradoxical: no-replies hurt more than negative replies, evoking worse attributions. In the end, however, no-replies are an engine for changing. From this perspective, a no-reply is not necessarily affect consumer welfare negatively. To exemplify, recall the opening scenario of this dissertation:

A man meets a woman at a bar on a Saturday, talking, dancing, drinking and having a good time. They then share their Facebook information and agree to have a date later on. Tuesday afternoon, he sends a message to invite her for dinner. He is notified that the invitation is received and read hours ago but he has not received a response yet.

In this example, receiving a no-reply could be a motivation to change, such improving social skills and mating interactions. In practical terms, it is more probable that the man will think about changing his behavior (e.g, calling, instead of sending a message, refining his chat subjects, improving his appearance, and so on). But, what if he had got a negative reply? At that time he would probably feel better than not receiving any thing, but he would be less probable to change, perpetrating the same mistakes.

From replier (or no-repliers) consumers, negative replies and no-replies would lead to different target attributions and reactions. For repliers, a clear and direct reply seems to always be the best option. Negative replies terminates the communication exchange and promote less behavioral intentions, which is usually more desirable, especially if repliers need a closure too. No-

replies require less effort, but could generate further annoyance, because unreplied individuals are more willing to try to continue the interaction, as showed in Study 3.

The findings of this research have implications for marketers as well. No-replies are frequently practiced by users from dating platforms (e. g., Match.com, Tinder, Happn), classified websites (e.g., Craigslist, eBay), professional networks (Linkedin), lodging booking services (e.g., Couchsurfing, Airbnb). Although no direct evidence is present that no-replies are detrimental to a company's marketing effort, in the long term, it is a plausible consequence since this research has shown that no-replies tend to invoke strong reactions. After receiving several no-replies, consumers could venture into other platforms or other websites to sell their goods and services or find someone to date. Airbnb sends an automatic e-mail to users not replied to, apologizing for 3<sup>rd</sup> party lister's misbehavior. Study 3 showed that a company's apology overturns the effect. However, more research is necessary to understand why this happened.

### 9.3 LIMITATIONS

This research has several limitations. First, I used Amazon M-turkers and student population from the USA for data collection, which limits the degree to which the findings can be generalized. However, as I used online contexts, familiarity of these populations with the online environment does not hurt the findings despite not representing the average consumer. Second, my empirical context was limited to online interactions. Although I believe that the findings speak to a lot of consumption interactions, I cannot deny that the biggest share of the effect is due to online interactions. Given the growth of communication technology, it has become easier for individuals to not reply and consequently be unreplied. The no-reply effect limited to online interactions is the physical "cold shoulder" from past. Third, I had difficulties checking many of the manipulations, because it would be so easy for participants to guess the hypothesis of the studies. Maybe, additional pilot studies could have checked the treatments before the main studies. Finally, any of my experiments involved a real behavior and probably, behavioral intentions may not always match up to actual behavior.

## 10 APPENDIX

### 10.1 PICTURES OF STUDY 2



## 11 LIST OF REFERENCES

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