



Why attractive women want gay male friends: A previously undiscovered strategy to prevent mating deception and sexual exploitation



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ABSTRACT

Although research has begun to elucidate why women form close friendships with homosexual males, little research has investigated individual differences in women's tendency to befriend gay men. Because (1) gay men do not have the motive to mate with women or to compete with them for straight male partners and (2) attractive women are more likely to be sexually and competitively targeted by heterosexual individuals, we hypothesized that attractive women place greater value on gay's men mating advice and are more likely to befriend them. In Study 1, participants indicated their likelihood of deceiving female targets. Results revealed that more attractive targets were more likely to be both sexually deceived by straight men and competitively deceived by women. In Study 2, women created their ideal group of friends by allocating "friend dollars" to individuals of different genders and sexual orientations. More attractive women allocated more dollars to gay male friends, and this outcome was mediated by their perception that gay men would value them beyond sex and could offer them valuable mating advice. These findings suggest that befriending gay men may be an important feature of women's mating strategies, especially among attractive women who face greater mating threats from heterosexual individuals.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between straight women and gay men has become a topic of major interest in popular media, from television shows to books and feature length films (de la Cruz & Dolby, 2007; Hopcke & Rafaty, 1999; Schenker, 2013). These media outlets recognize that straight women and gay men share a notable degree of closeness and rapport—characteristics that are conspicuously absent from their relationships with straight men. Empirical research also provides evidentiary support for the phenomenon of women enjoying forming close friendships with gay men; Grigoriou (2004), for example, documented that women experience an increased level of trust and comfort when they are around gay men.

A plausible explanation for straight women's heightened trust in gay men is the absence of gay men's ulterior mating motivations (Russell, DelPriore, Butterfield, & Hill, 2013; Russell, Ta, Lewis, Babcock, & Ickes, 2015). Premising their research on the idea that gay men are neither motivated to sexually exploit straight women (like straight men could be) nor are they motivated to bias the information that they give to straight women in mating-related situations (as heterosexual female

mating rivals might be), Russell et al. (2015) predicted and found that straight women trust a gay man's mating-related information more than the same information offered by either a straight man or another straight woman.

Although the research conducted by Russell et al. (2015) sheds light on a central reason why straight women trust and befriend gay men, it is not yet clear why some straight women exhibit a greater tendency than others to befriend gay men. An open research question is whether these individual differences in women's tendencies to befriend gay men are random or are systematically and functionally linked to specific variables influencing the potential benefits of such gay-straight relationships.

1.1. Women's physical attractiveness and desire for gay male friends

There are strong theoretical reasons that women's physical attractiveness should play an important role in influencing their likelihood of forming friendships with gay men. Physically attractive women are frequently the targets of both unsolicited sexual advances from straight men and of envy and jealousy from other straight women (Dijkstra & Buunk, 2002; Massar & Buunk, 2009). In addition, heterosexual men perceive physically attractive women to be more sexually exploitable (Goetz, Easton, Lewis, & Buss, 2012; Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1999) and such women also have to deal with competitive tactics

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initiated by other straight women (Agthe, Sporrle, & Maner, 2011; Fisher, 2004).

Because of the heightened sexual threat and competition that physically attractive women face, such women may be particularly motivated to form friendships with gay men. Consistent with this idea, women with more positive perceptions of their bodies tend to report having a greater number of gay male friends (Bartlett, Patterson, VanderLaan, & Vasey, 2009). This correlational finding is consistent with the notion that women who see themselves as more attractive may be more inclined to enter friendships with gay men in order to mitigate the costs that they could potentially incur in their friendships with heterosexual individuals.

Given the high mating-related costs that attractive women can experience in friendships with straight men and other straight women, attractive women are expected to highly value mating-related advice from their gay male friends. Note that this expectation does not depend on gay men necessarily possessing any particular mating expertise. Rather, it rests on our assumption that attractive women would particularly value gay men's mating-related advice because of straight men's and other women's motives to bias the mating-related information that they give to straight women. Indeed, recent research has demonstrated that straight women perceive more sincerity in gay men's mating-related advice relative to advice provided by straight men and straight women (Russell et al., 2015). Further, because attractive women are more likely to be the targets of deceptive manipulation by heterosexual individuals, they should place a particularly high value on gay men's mating advice and exhibit an elevated tendency to seek them out as friends.

1.2. The present research

We advanced the hypothesis that physically attractive women's increased risk of being deceived by heterosexual individuals motivates their desire to befriend gay men. In Study 1, we investigated whether attractive women were more likely to be the targets of exploitative sexual advances and competitive mating deception. We predicted that attractive female targets would be (1) more likely to be sexually exploited by straight men and (2) more likely to be competitively deceived by straight women. In Study 2, we investigated whether women's physical attractiveness predicts their valuation of gay men's mating-related advice and their desire to befriend gay men. Specifically, we predicted that (1) more physically attractive women would possess a greater desire to have gay male friends, and (2) that this relationship would be mediated by two factors: (a) the belief that gay men (more than straight men) value them beyond their sexuality, and (b) their valuation of gay men's mating-related information.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

One hundred and three undergraduate students (60 heterosexual females, 43 heterosexual males) participated for partial course credit. The mean age of the sample was 21.02 years ($SD = 3.47$). The sample was 36% Caucasian, 24% Hispanic, 13% African American, and 19% Asian. Eight percent of participants identified with other ethnicities.

2.1.2. Materials

2.1.2.1. Female photographs. We recruited a different sample of 68 women to create our Study 1 stimuli. These women were instructed to come to the laboratory wearing form-fitting clothing (e.g., yoga pants, non-baggy tee-shirts) and no makeup. Upon obtaining each woman's informed, written consent, a research assistant took a full-body, front-facing photograph of each woman. We compiled all 68

photographs and displayed each photograph individually to an independent group of raters ($N = 10$, $\alpha = 0.94$) who rated the physical attractiveness of each participant on a 10-point scale (1 = very unattractive, 10 = very attractive).

2.1.3. Procedure

The 103 actual participants in Study 1 completed the study online. The participants viewed all 68 female target photographs and were presented with the following prompt prior to viewing each photograph: "Imagine that you encounter the following woman at a party. Please consider each of the questions pertaining to you and to the woman in the photograph." Then, each male participant indicated the likelihood that he would try to (1) seduce the woman, (2) convince the woman to have sex with him, (3) tell the woman what she wants to hear in order to have sex with her, and (4) persuade her that he is a good catch. Each female participant indicated the likelihood that she would (1) feel threatened by the woman, (2) compete with the woman for a mate, (3) withhold information from the woman about potential mating opportunities, and (4) divert the woman's attention away from a potential mate that the female participant herself is interested in. All items were answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely).

2.2. Results

We computed composite scores of the four items pertinent to sexually exploiting the target (male participants; $\alpha = 0.95$) and competitively deceiving the target (female participants; $\alpha = 0.94$) by averaging the participants' responses on these measures. Because each participant viewed all targets, ratings were nested within participant in hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analyses that tested the relationships between the female targets' physical attractiveness and the two outcome measures of (1) the male participants' reported likelihood of attempting to sexually exploit them and (2) the female participants' reported likelihood of competitively deceiving them.

As predicted, men's reported likelihood of attempting to sexually exploit female targets increased with the targets' attractiveness, $\beta = 0.38$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.001$. Also as predicted, women's reported likelihood of competitively deceiving the female targets increased with the attractiveness of the targets, $\beta = 0.30$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.001$ (see Fig. 1).

3. Study 2

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

The same 68 women that participated as the targets in Study 1 served as the participants in Study 2. All women were heterosexual, and the mean age of the sample was 21.00 years ($SD = 5.15$). The sample was 34% Caucasian, 22% Hispanic, 25% African American, and 6% Asian. Thirteen percent of the participants identified with other ethnicities. All participants received partial course credit for their participation in Study 2.

3.1.2. Measures.

3.1.2.1. Physical attractiveness ratings. We used the same independent ratings of attractiveness as in Study 1.

3.1.2.2. Women's beliefs about gay men. Because the Study 1 findings clearly supported our expectation that straight men are particularly likely to sexually target and deceive attractive women, we wanted to assess the degree to which these women would feel that gay men uniquely value them beyond their sexuality. To assess this, we had participants indicate their level of agreement with the following statement on a 7-point Likert-scale: "I believe that gay men – relative to straight men –

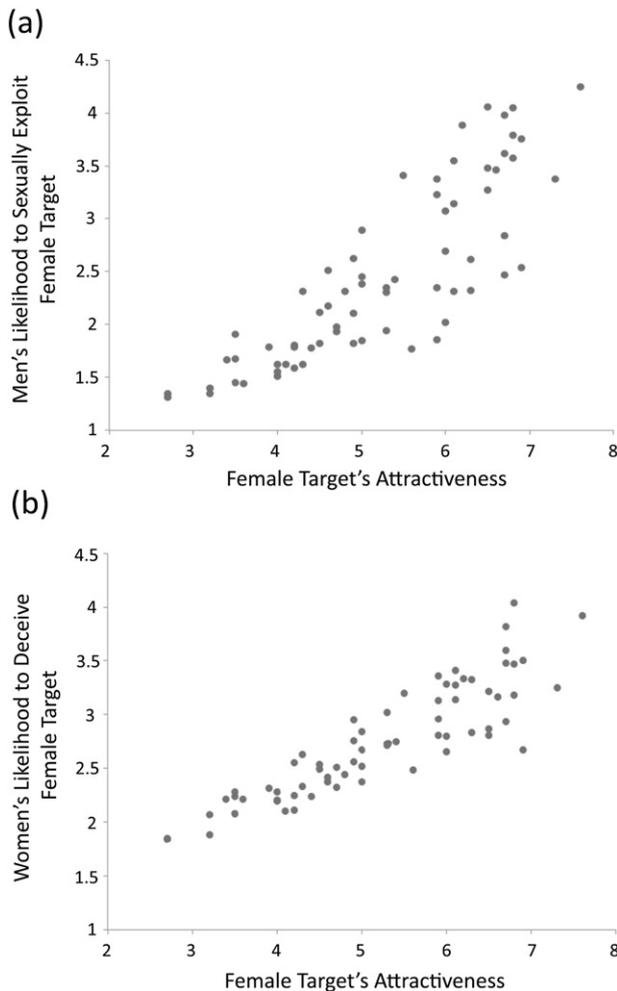


Fig. 1. The relationships between the female target's attractiveness and (a) men's reported likelihood to sexually exploit the target, and (b) women's reported likelihood to competitively deceive the target (Study 1). Data points represent a mean rating for each female target.

are more likely to value me beyond my sexuality" (1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly agree). We also wanted to assess whether this perception of gay men enhanced women's valuation of gay men's mating-related information. We therefore had participants also indicate their level of agreement with the following three statements: (1) "I believe gay men could offer me valuable and honest advice if I wanted to look my best," (2) "I value gay men's honest and unbiased insights into dating and relationships" and (3) "I value gay men's unbiased, 'male' perspective." We averaged women's responses on these three items ($\alpha = 0.81$) to create a composite score of their valuation of gay men's mating-related advice.

3.1.2.3. Budget allocation task. The Study 2 participants then completed a budget allocation task that was inspired by previous research (see e.g., Lewis et al., 2011; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). This task required the participants to spend "friend dollars" on individuals of different genders and sexual orientations to create their ideal group of friends. The participants were given a total budget of 18 friend dollars and were asked to allocate these funds to create the constituency of their ideal friend group of (1) straight female friends, (2) straight male friends, (3) gay male friends, and (4) lesbian female friends. Each 'type' of friend cost the participants' one 'friend dollar.' Therefore, each participant could potentially choose 18 of one type of friend or a combination of individuals of varying genders and sexual orientations.

3.1.3. Procedure

The participants were informed that they would be participating in a study designed to examine their friendship preferences. First, the participants answered a questionnaire that included items assessing demographics (e.g., age, ethnicity) as well as the previously-described items that assessed the women's beliefs about gay men. The participants then completed the budget allocation task to create their ideal group of friends.

3.2. Results

To test our first prediction that the women's physical attractiveness would be linked to the number of 'friend dollars' that they spent on gay male friends, we conducted bivariate correlational analyses to examine the associations between each participant's attractiveness and the total dollar amount that they spend on each type of friend (i.e., straight female, straight male, gay male, and lesbian female). As expected, as the women's rated attractiveness increased, the number of friend dollars they spent on gay male friends also increased, $r(66) = 0.26, p = 0.04$. On the other hand, the women's attractiveness was not systematically linked to the number of dollars that they spent on any of the other friend types (all $ps \geq 0.38$).

3.2.1. Mediation analysis

To test the prediction that the women's valuation of gay men's mating-related advice mediates the relationship between women's attractiveness and dollars spent on gay male friends, we performed a multiple mediation analysis (5000 bootstrap resamples) of the pathway from woman's attractiveness to dollars spent on gay male friends through the following mediators in sequence: (1) the women's belief that gay men—relative to straight men—value them beyond sex, and (2) the women's valuation of gay men's mating advice.

Overall, this model exhibited good fit and accounted for a significant proportion of variance in the number of 'friend dollars' allocated to gay male friends, $R^2 = 0.15, F(3, 64) = 3.71, p = 0.02$. First, more physically attractive women were more likely to believe that gay men—relative to straight men—are more likely to value them beyond their sexuality, $\beta = 0.48, SE = 0.11, p < 0.001$. This increased belief led women to place greater value on gay men's mating advice, $\beta = 0.48, SE = 0.11, p < 0.001$, which in turn led them to allocate a greater proportion of their 'friend dollar' budget to gay male friends, $\beta = 0.29, SE = 0.15, p = 0.05$. Consequently, and as predicted, this indirect effect of women's attractiveness on dollars allocated to gay male friends was statistically significant, $\beta = 0.09, SE = 0.05, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.01, 0.23]$ (see Fig. 2). Importantly, the effect of women's attractiveness on their expenditure on gay male friends was fully mediated by their beliefs about gay men's valuation of them and their valuation of gay men's mating advice; there was no direct effect after controlling for the two sequentially ordered mediators in the model, $\beta = 0.16, SE = 0.13, p = 0.23$.

4. Discussion

Although recent efforts have begun to uncover why straight women experience a greater sense of trust and comfort with gay men than with heterosexual individuals (Russell et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2015), previous research has not proposed any individual-differences variables in women that would predict their likelihood of befriending gay men and valuing their mating advice. Previous studies and literature sources have revealed that many straight women enjoy making gay male friends and spending much of their time with them (Cho, 2001; Hopcke & Rafaty, 1999; Malone, 1980), but they have failed to identify who these women are or to explain why they are more likely to want gay male friends. The current studies provide the first evidence of a systematic predictor of individual differences among women in their desire to seek out gay male friendship and companionship: the women's physical attractiveness.

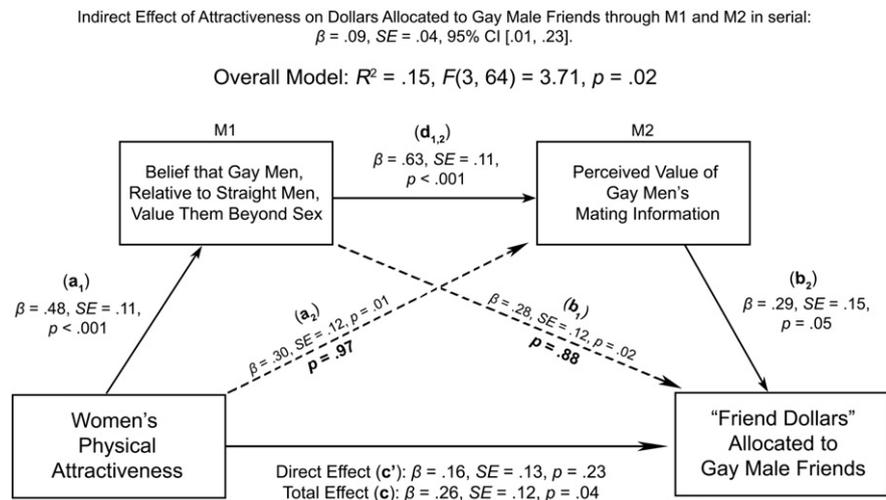


Fig. 2. Mediation model illustrating the indirect effect of women's physical attractiveness on "friend dollars" allocated to gay male friends through M1 (belief that gay men value women beyond having sex with them) and M2 (perceived value of gay men's mating information) (Study 2). Note: Bold *p*-values indicate non-significant a_2 and b_1 paths after controlling for M1 and M2, respectively.

In support of the hypothesis that physically attractive women should be more likely to want gay men as friends, the current studies demonstrated that (1) attractive women are more likely to be sexually exploited and competitively deceived by straight men and other straight women (Study 1); (2) straight women's physical attractiveness is systematically linked to their desire for gay male friendships; and (3) this desire is mediated by (a) women's belief that gay men—relative to straight men—value them beyond sex and (b) women's valuation of gay men's mating advice. Taken together, these findings provide converging support for the idea that the women's own level of physical attractiveness play an important role in their willingness to form friendships with gay men, who are perceived to lack the motives to bias the mating-related advice that they offer to women.

The current studies also add to the body of literature on female mating strategies. The evolutionarily informed literature has documented multiple strategies that women use to counter the exploitative tactics of heterosexual individuals, such as sexual coercion from men (see, for example, Garver-Apgar, Gangestad, & Simpson, 2007; McKibbin & Shackelford, 2011) and mate guarding from other women (see, for example, Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Krems, Neel, Neuberg, Puts, & Kenrick, 2016). The current research reveals a previously undiscovered strategy that attractive women can also employ to avoid the costs that they could incur in their relationships with heterosexual men and women: forming friendships with gay men to protect themselves from information that could be intended to manipulate and deceive them in mating contexts.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

The present studies contribute to the growing body of literature suggesting that straight women—particularly those who are frequent targets of sexual and competitive threat—befriend gay men due to their lack of ulterior mating motives and their ability to provide unbiased advice in mating contexts (Russell et al., 2015). However, there are a few limitations of the present studies that should be noted.

First, we examined women's preference for having gay male friends but did not examine whether this preference translates to real-life friendships between attractive women and gay men. Regardless of attractive women's preference for gay male friends, it is possible that these friendships may not play out in certain contexts. For instance, in some environments (e.g., high school, conservative colleges) where openly gay men often experience more prejudice and stigmatization from their peers, gay men may be steered toward forming friendships with less socially desirable and, potentially, less attractive individuals.

Additionally, it is possible that gay men may not have a strong preference for making friends with attractive (relative to less attractive) women. Because gay men are not sexually attracted to women, gay men may place less of a premium on a female friend's physical attractiveness and may place greater importance on her internal attributes (Hopcke & Rafaty, 1999; Malone, 1980). Future experimental or observational research, therefore, should attempt to explore the boundary conditions for these friendships in real-life situations.

Second, although our findings supported our hypothesis that attractive women are more likely to seek gay male friendship because they are more likely to be deceived by straight men and other straight women, there may be another mechanism at work. Specifically, women who befriend gay men may subsequently experience increases in their physical attractiveness via their ability to receive unbiased mating-related advice (e.g., what to wear, or how to present themselves in front of men) from their gay male friends. This aligns with the interpretation made by Bartlett et al. (2009), suggesting that women experience increases in their sexual attractiveness when they spend more time around gay male friends. Thus, it would be interesting and informative for future research to determine whether befriending gay men has a positive impact on a woman's physical attractiveness over time and, therefore, makes her more desirable to straight men and more of a competitive threat to other straight women.

Third, Study 2 did not assess attractive women's valuation of mating advice from non-gay males. This, combined with the study procedure prior to the budget allocation task, represents a potential study limitation. Because we asked women how much they value gay men's mating advice, it is possible that these questions "primed" the straight women to allocate more dollars to gay male friends in the budget allocation task. However, the primary implication of this argument is that if the women were similarly "primed" regarding straight men, then they would place a comparable value on their advice. This is contra-indicated by the results of the present Study 1, which clearly show that straight men are particularly likely to give attractive women untrustworthy and misleading mating-related information. If attractive women are aware of this likelihood, which seems likely because of their demonstrated vigilance and upset in response to straight men's deceptive strategies to engage in sex (Haselton, Buss, Oubaid, & Angleitner, 2005), then "priming" the advice of straight men should exaggerate the difference we found, not eliminate it.

This "priming" interpretation also fails the test of theoretical parsimony. Unlike our interpretation, which accounts for all of the findings in the two present studies (including the mediational findings), the priming interpretation cannot account for the other findings that we

and other researchers have reported previously. For example, our interpretation has already been supported by previous findings indicating that (1) straight women trust mating advice from gay men more than they do from other straight men or women (Russell et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2015); (2) straight women perceive more sincerity in gay men's mating information relative to that of both straight men and women (Russell et al., 2015); (3) more attractive women are more vigilant of other straight female competitors' anger and threat toward them (Krems, Neuberger, Filip-Crawford, & Kenrick, 2015), and (4) attractive women are frequent targets of manipulative tactics employed by these female competitors (Fisher & Cox, 2010). In summary, when the entire pattern of relevant findings is taken into account, our explanation appears to be the only one proposed so far that is both comprehensive and parsimonious enough to account for all of them.

Lastly, and as called for by our hypothesis, we assessed the value that straight women placed on gay men's mating-related advice in Study 2 but did not assess whether the women similarly value other types of information offered by gay men (e.g., the perceived value of gay men's cooking advice). The reasoning behind our hypothesis suggests that attractive women should specifically value the mating information that gay men could offer to them (Russell et al., 2015), but it does not yield a clear a priori prediction that they should also place greater value on advice from gay men in areas that are unrelated to mating. This, and other research questions, also awaits future investigation in a growing body of research on this unique and important category of social relationship.

4.2. Conclusions

The current research offers some of the first evidence that (1) physically attractive straight women are more likely to want gay male friends than less attractive women are, and (2) their desire for gay male friendship is driven by the belief that gay men will (a) value them beyond sex and (b) provide them with unbiased mating advice and insight that is free from the biased motives that taint the advice of sexually-interested straight men and other straight female competitors. In Study 1, we found strong empirical evidence for the biased mating motives of straight men and other straight women that are intended to deceive attractive women. In Study 2, we found evidence that attractive women's desire to have gay male friends is indeed mediated by their perception that gay men—unlike straight men—offer them a non-sexual friendship and unbiased mating advice. Taken together, these findings not only contribute to a growing body of work examining how women thwart potential mating threats, but also provide key insights into the factors that influence the formation and development of close relationships between straight women and gay men.

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