



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 –

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