



# Commercial friendships between gay sales associates and straight female customers in luxury settings: A proposed theoretical framework



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates friendships between gay sales associates and heterosexual female customers in luxury retail settings. By employing grounded theory methodology, the study integrates theories and findings from diverse literature streams into an original conceptual framework to illustrate the resources gay sales associates and straight female customers receive from and provide to each other during retail exchanges. The study explains why gay male-straight female friendships are uniquely suited for luxury consumption settings. Female customers characterize their friendships with gay sales associates as providing honesty, security, trust, and comfort, which stems from the absence of sexual interest and a lack of inter-female competition. Gay sales associates receive acceptance for who they are and for their displays of unconventional masculinity in retail settings. They also obtain a temporary rite from their female customers, a so-called mandate of privacy, which permits both parties to ignore the bounds of modesty and accept a degree of intimacy. Such intimacy facilitates transactions that require both personalization and customer-employee closeness, such as the selling of high-end apparel, accessories, and jewelry.

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## 1. Introduction

Many service encounters, especially those in retail settings, are social encounters in which the relational bonds between and among customers and employees help drive consumption (Beatty et al., 1996; Czepiel, 1990; Rosenbaum, 2006; Swan et al., 2001). Relationship marketing represents a marketing philosophy that focuses on keeping and improving relationships with existing customers, rather than on acquiring new customers (Beetles and Harris, 2010; Naidu et al., 1999; Zeithaml et al., 2013). A primary objective of relationship marketing is the formation of customer intimacy, a situation in which companies, such as retailers (e.g., Nordstrom, Home Depot), tailor and shape products and services to each customer's unique needs to build customer satisfaction, trust, and, loyalty (Treacy and Wiersema, 1993; Yim et al., 2008).

Within this broad concept of relationship marketing, which emphasizes intimacy between customers and a focal firm,

relational selling calls attention to the customer and sales associate relationship and the formation of bonds that may inextricably link the two parties in a relationship that mimics that of traditional friendships (Yim et al., 2008)—that is, so-called commercial friendships (Price and Arnould, 1999; Rosenbaum, 2009). Retail organizations must often decide then how much to rely on relationship selling, versus relationship marketing, a choice that depends on the type of salesperson-customer relational interaction desired in the selling context (Beatty et al., 1996). Relational selling is especially important in luxury retail settings; according to Luxury Institute (2012), 70% of ultra-wealthy customers, who transact and communicate with a specific salesperson, report that their relationships with sales associates cause them to spend more on goods and services in stores and on the web.

Although friendships are difficult to quantify and appear more holistic and subjective than empirically measurable and objective (Brissett and Oldenburg, 1982), one unique friendship has recently taken “center stage within popular culture” (Rumens, 2008, p. 82), has achieved significance in psychology (Mehta, 2013; Russell et al., 2013), has received attention in popular press (De la Cruz and Dolby, 2007; Hopcke and Rafaty, 1999; Whitney, 1990), and has become prevalent in luxury boutique settings (Peretz, 1995)—

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that is, the meaningful and emotional friendships between gay men and straight women. Findings on the effect of gay–straight friendships in retail settings, however, are lacking in marketing research, though inklings of these friendships appear in sociology. For example, Peretz's (1995) participant observation in a Paris-based boutique and Lawson's (1999) observations in hair salons both reveal that straight female customers often prefer gay male sales associates to heterosexual female and male service providers. However, with the exception of these articles, in-depth theoretical explorations into the development of commercial friendships between gay associates and straight female customers in retail settings are non-existent.

Commercial friendships tend to rest on a foundation of prolonged and recurrent interactions (Brissett and Oldenburg, 1982), which foster and encourage reciprocal disclosure (Price and Arnould, 1999) and the exchange of therapeutic, social supportive resources (Rosenbaum, 2006, 2009). As an extension of this notion, the proposed framework posits that gay male–straight female commercial friendships in retail settings rest on a foundation based on unique comfort that stems from the absence of male–female sexual interest (Singleton, 2005), lack of inter-female competition, acceptance of the gay culture (Navvab, 2013), and acceptance of “unconventional masculinity” (Hopcke and Rafaty, 1999, p. 51), in which gay men often display feminine-like traits or mannerisms. From a managerial perspective, commercial friendships between gay associates and their straight female customers may be strongly correlated with key marketing objectives arising from more traditionally explored commercial friendships, including customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word of mouth (Nicholls, 2010; Price and Arnould, 1999).

This research addresses an apparent void in the retailing literature by putting forth an original “interactive family” (Glaser, 1978, p. 76) theoretical framework (Fig. 1) that organizes a disparate stream of psychological, sociological, evolutionary biology, and popular press literature to explain why socially supportive, commercial friendships may form between gay sales associates and straight female customers in luxury retail settings. The following sections define and develop each of the components in

Fig. 1 by drawing from the tenets of grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Wolfswinkel et al., 2011). Propositions based on the framework are highlighted, and implications for future theoretical and empirical research are discussed. Overall, this article extends the relationship marketing, relational selling, and commercial friendship paradigms, as well as gay consumer research, which tends to focus on gay discrimination (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007) rather than exploring how homosexuality may lead gay men to receive “privileges” (Shugart, 2003, p. 67) from straight women in some luxury retail settings. We turn attention to placing this research within the commercial friendship paradigm.

## 2. Positioning in the literature

### 2.1. Commercial friendships in retail settings

Research on salesperson–customer relationships reveals that salespeople classify customers into a relational continuum typology that, at one extreme, treats customers as acquaintances, involves simple transactions between unknown parties, and focuses primarily on the transaction at hand and, at the other extreme, categorizes relationships between salespeople and customers as analogous to traditional close friendships, or commercial friends, in which both parties share casual conversation and even engage in joint leisure experiences (Swan et al., 2001; see also Johnson and Seines, 2004). The notion that customers often form meaningful commercial-based friendships with retail employees, as well as other customers, is not new to either marketing or the social sciences (Grayson, 2007; Nicholls, 2010). For example, the sociologist Stone (1954) reports that some women (i.e., housewives) rate the quality of a retail store in terms of the closeness of their relationships with store employees. Stone explains that this group of women, conceptualized as the personalizing consumer, shopped at retail outlets to maintain personal relationships, which resembled that of traditional friendships, with retail associates.

In psychology, Cowen (1982) argues that the commercial

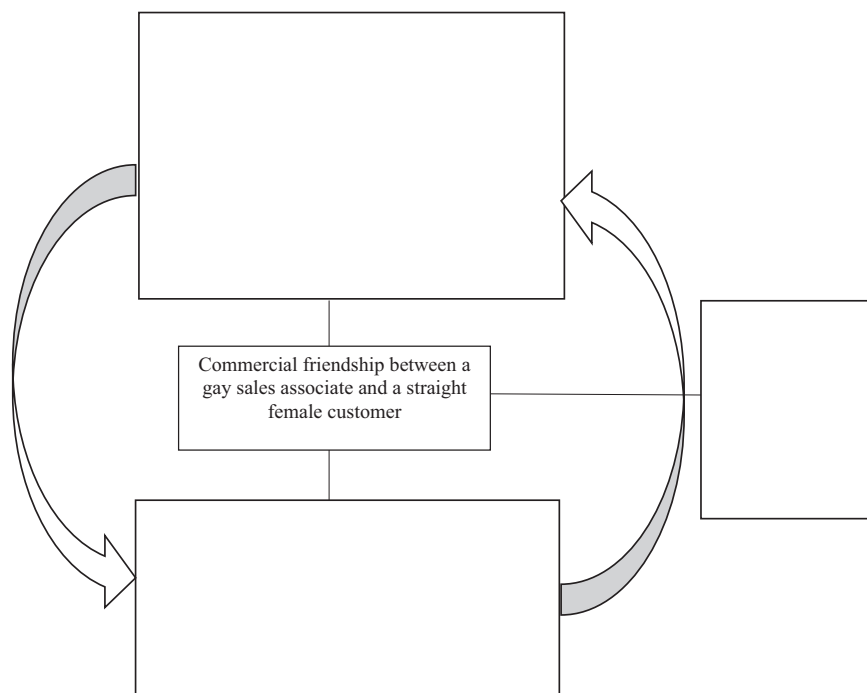


Fig. 1. Framework for understanding gay sales associate–straight female customer friendships.

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