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Identifying Sexual Attraction in Platonic
Cross-Sex Relationships and its Effects on Friendships

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Identifying Sexual Attraction in Platonic, Cross-Sex Relationships and its Effects on Friendships

The dynamics of men and women are becoming more complex through their growing interaction in the community; thus, there has been a rise in the formation of cross-sex platonic friendships. Although advancement has been made in research of how these interactions affect the social scripts that define relationships, according to Affifi and Falukner (2000), there is a lack of investigation that looks into sexual attraction in friendships, and its potential effects on relational development. Because of the lack of knowledge in this field, there are no clear implications of how having feelings of sexual attraction towards a friend, while attempting to maintain the characteristics of friendship, can affect the relationship between cross-sex friends. There is also a lack of knowledge regarding whether gender differences based on the sexual attraction that may be present. The present study examines whether potential sexual attraction or sexual tension exists, and if there is a difference in the levels of sexual attraction based on your biological sex.

Cross-sex, Platonic Friendships

Cross-sex friendships, or platonic relationships, between two members of the opposite sex, have become fairly common in society. Conolly, Craig, Golberg, Papler (1999) defined platonic relationships in comparison to romantic relationships. By doing so, they were able to establish some key differences. For one, romantic relationships differ in qualitative rather than quantitative characteristics. There is no set amount of characteristics that distinguishes a romantic relationship from a platonic relationship, but rather there are different levels that are shown in a romantic relationship that are not as prevalent in platonic relationships, which in turn make the person feel connected on a romantic level. Guerrero, Anderson and Afifi (2011) state

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that one prominent characteristic in romantic relationships is having passion. Passion is an intense emotion that people tend to associate with love, because it goes beyond the feeling of liking someone. Having passion can include having emotions such as physical and sexual attraction, which are as well key differences. Platonic relationships do not contain passion, as there is an expectation to maintain the relationship free from any sexual interaction between both people. It is not until the passion is presented that people tend to escalate their relationship and define it as romantic. Another key difference in romantic relationships is that people report a deeper love connection, and they report higher levels of excitement and longing towards their partner. These differences provide guidelines for categorizing relationships with members of the opposite sex as platonic or romantic.

If a relationship is platonic, then, by definition, there should be no sexual intimacy involved in the friendship. Messeman, Canary, and Hause (2000) found that the main motivation for maintaining a platonic friendship is to sustain a “safeguard relationship” with someone, meaning that the friendship is maintained as a potential alternative in case the current romantic relationship fails. It was also reported that the main characteristic motivating people to remain in the platonic friendship is support. One form of support that was reported was the feeling of intimacy in the friendship, and having the trust to confide in that person. In addition, their most notable finding is that one of the reasons for why people maintain the platonic relationship is because they feel it is beneficial to them in some way. It can be beneficial for a variety of reasons all of which fulfill a person’s motivations. One example mentioned by Messeman, Canary, and Hause is that a person may keep a relationship platonic because they fear being rejected, making it beneficial to maintain the relationship’s platonic status at that point. Although the relationship is labeled as platonic, the sexual attraction can lead to initiations of flirting or subtle affection. In

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addition, it is noted that the conversation of advancing the relationship is typically avoided, because they are unsure if the feelings are mutual. Although there may be some sexual tension among one of the friends, the platonic friendship is sustained despite the presence of said sexual tension and the known complications that this bring to the definition of a platonic friendship. Even though the sexual attraction is not openly discussed, the thoughts can present potential problems in defining the current relationship.

Sexual Attraction

Typically, sexual attraction is present in romantic relationships. Sexual attraction is defined according to Guerrero, Anderson and Afifi (2011) as having an attraction to someone that can potentially arouse you and motivate you to perform sexual tasks. Sexual attraction is seen more in romantic relationships because of the levels of intimacy that are associated with sexual behavior. According to Roberts, Simpson, Armstrong, Davidson, Robertson, McLean, Beynon, and Hurs (2010), sexual attraction is defined in a biological perspective as “pheromones used to coordinate many aspects of social behavior, including sexual recognition and attraction to bring opposite sex conspecifics together for mating” (p.2). In other words, there is a chemical balance that is released by mammals that contributes to people’s natural inclination to want to reproduce. Ellis (1992) states that people logically consider potential mating partners based on their mate value: the higher they feel they are of value in the environment, the more likely they are to become sexually attracted to them. Given that humans have these predispositions; it becomes difficult to set boundaries and limitations in platonic cross-sex friendships. There is a natural tendency in humans to want to initiate sexual behaviors with a partner when they feel it is beneficial to their goal of reproducing. Through these new forms of interactions between men

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and women, the definitions and boundaries between the relationships are becoming less distinguishable.

Effects on Friendships

Given the emotional attachment that is formed between both members, both men and women view friendships as an essential and crucial component to maintaining happiness in their life. In a study conducted by Anderson, Keltner, and John (2003), there was evidence found to support the theory that emotional convergence is present in cross-sex relationships. People depend on friendships because of the emotional satisfaction that they bring. The emotional attachment that individuals feel towards a friend motivates them to want to continue maintaining their relationship with that person.

By increasing interaction and creating relationships with members of the opposite sex, the possibility of having a friendship with a member of the opposite sex is very low. In relation to these interactions, according to Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler (1999), people tend to guide their actions through social scripts. In other words, the way people tend to act in a relationship is largely dependent on what is socially accepted and expected of them in given situations. In interactions between men and women in forms of friendships, there are vague social expectations of how that relationship is supposed to function. In the past, a man and woman interacted with one another to determine the possibility of mating or becoming partners, because that was the biologically and socially expected norm. Now, with cross-sex friends becoming socially common, the “evolved mating strategies impinge on their friendship experiences” (Bleske-Rechke, et al. 2012). The customs and expectations of mating might make it difficult to keep a friendship absent of sexual desires. According to Hanson (1989), social scripts establishing how to behave in same-gender relationships define society, but “there are no

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social scripts in cross-gender relationships” (p.1). A potential social script that may exist between men and women is sexual attraction, which could possibly lead them to initiate a more intimate relationship, because they are biologically inclined to want to mate with members of the opposite sex. Although Guerrero and Chavez (2005) noted that most relationships are perceived as platonic, meaning there is no sexual involvement between the two members; the lack of social scripts blurs the boundaries and may lead to these individuals acting on their sense of sexual attraction. As cited by Guerrero, Anderson and Afifi, Halastis and Christakis (2011) reported that around 50 percent of cross-sex friends experienced sexual attraction towards their partner. With sexual attraction present in a large portion of friendships between a man and woman, it becomes difficult to distinguish the lines between a romantic and platonic friendship.

In addition, the new notion of “friends with benefits” can be seen as one of the mating strategies that create an obstruction to platonic friendships. This concept has become a raising issue of importance. A friend with benefits is defined by Reiber (2010) as “hook-ups consisting of sexual behaviors between partners in the absence of a traditional romantic relationship and without the promise of other benefits. They are often considered a form of ‘no-strings-attached’”(p.3). In sum, a friend with benefits relationship involves incorporating sexual activity to a platonic friendship, making it a romantic relationship, but disengaging in the commitment. Bisson and Levine (2002) reported that 60 percent of people have had a relationship that falls under this category and have claimed that they were concerned “that sex might complicate friendships by bringing forth unreciprocated desires for romantic commitment” (p.10). In this situation, you no longer have the characteristic of maintaining a mutual understanding of the friendship. The relationship has moved into a new category, one that falls between both the platonic and romantic characteristic while still maintaining its own individual characteristics,

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such as negotiating the sexual boundaries for what is accepted between the individual relationships.

With the formation of friends-with-benefits, there are new implications to what a platonic relationship is founded on. Potentially, there can be more sexual tension than what has been established by previous research. The present study will examine cross-sex platonic friendships and their sexual attraction towards one another, in hopes of providing a more concrete analysis on the relationship between the two variables. This study will focus on the question: is it possible for a heterosexual friendship to exist without having any sexual attraction tied to the relationship?

It is important to understand the types and levels of attraction in a friendship between a man and a woman. Given that in society you are constantly interacting with members of the opposite sex, and in some cases developing close relationships with them, it is important to understand if humans are capable of maintaining a friendship without acquiring intimate desires. If those intimate desires do develop, is it possible to look past them and maintain the mutual understanding that the friendship is strictly platonic? The ultimate goal is to figure out whether it is possible not to feel any sexual attraction in a platonic relationship. This will contribute to further research in interpersonal communication and its research in both platonic and cross-sex relationships. It can also be used to help explain the amount of sexual attraction between a male and a female in a non-romantic environment. Sexual attraction is one of the key components that can lead to a romantic relationship, which is why it should be a critical aspect to study in platonic relationships.

Gender Differences

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According to Ward (2012), there are gender differences in attraction between men and women. Although men and women claim to be in platonic relationships, they have “sexual impulses” for the member of the opposite sex (p.1). In the study, they asked multiple pairs of cross-sex friends questions pertaining to attraction and how they felt about it in relation to that friend. It was discovered that men were more attracted to the woman than vice versa, and men also perceived that the women had higher levels of attraction towards them. Men were also more likely to want to engage in sexual activity with their cross-sex platonic friend because they were sexually attracted to them. Overall, although the women were not attracted to the male friend, the men felt that there was some sort of mutual attraction between both members. Through the study, it was concluded that men and women have different views on platonic friendships. Women tend to view these relationships as a friendship with little to no attraction among them while men feel that there is possible attraction between their friendships. In addition, in study reported by a media newspaper article in *The Telegraph*, similar to the previous study, men were more likely to be sexually attracted to their platonic friend. It was also found that the sexual attraction was one of the primary reasons for why men choose to maintain the friendship. Although women did not report high levels of attraction, they reported that the friendship could potentially be considered to become romantic if their current relationship failed. Although women did not report being sexually attracted to their friend, by stating that the friend could be a potential partner, they are implying that there is a slight potential for attraction. Men were more likely to report being more attracted to the women, but women also suggested a slight attraction. Given that platonic friendships were reporting sexual attraction toward one another, it was concluded that the notion of friends-with-benefits was indeed possible. With sexual attraction being a prevalent characteristic in platonic friendships from a male’s perspective, the idea of engaging in

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sexual activities with a friend is not so far-fetched. Based on the following findings, the present study makes the following prediction:

H1: Men in cross-sex platonic relationships are more likely to be sexually attracted to their friends than women.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The present study aims to understand the potential sexual attraction in a platonic, cross-sex friendship. The study will use a convenience sample of undergraduate students from Trinity University. Because of this, the study population will be limited to college students. The sample was composed of 101 undergraduate college students (men=47; women=54), with an average of 19.51 years ($SD=2.08$). The sample consisted of 60% freshmen, 15% sophomores, 18% juniors, and 7% seniors.

To contact students the survey was distributed via Facebook. The survey first described the goals of the study, which was to determine the levels of sexual attraction in cross-sex platonic friendships. If participants wished to continue, a link directed them to the online survey. After completing a consent form, participants were asked to think of their closest platonic friendship of the opposite sex. Participants were then asked to complete the remainder of the questionnaire based on the person they selected. Lastly, once the participant completed the survey, there were three questions that followed for demographic purposes. The participant was asked for his/her age, school year based on the number of credits accumulated, and the sex of the friend they had chosen. In addition, all procedures received approval from the university's institutional review board.

Measures

Biological Sex. The study focused on sex differences; therefore, it was important to distinguish the participants based on their biological sex. Specifically, students were asked in the survey for both their biological sex, and the biological sex of the person they had chosen. Based on the information gathered from the first portion of this question, it was possible to categorize the data between male and female. The additional question asking for the sex of the friend the participant selected was included to ensure that the participants were choosing members of the opposite sex when answering the questions. Any data from a participant who answered the survey based on a heterosexual friendship was discarded.

Sexual attraction. Guerrero, Anderson and Afifi (2011) define sexual attraction as having a strong sexual desire towards someone. A series of questions were asked to assess the levels of sexual attraction between the members of a platonic friendship, such as “I am sexually attracted to this person”, “I have a strong sexual desire towards this person” and “I perceive this person to be sexually attractive”. Each question was asked to measure if sexual desire exists in the platonic friendship. The level of sexual attraction was measured using a Likert-type scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Reverse coding was used for “I do not feel any sexual tension towards this person.” The Chronbachs alpha was .842, which indicated that this scale contained strong internal reliability.

Results

The hypothesis predicted that men would report higher levels of sexual attraction than women would. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare sexual attraction scores as reported by men and women. Results did not detect a significant difference between sexual

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attraction reported by men ($M=2.93$, $SD=.97$) and women ($M =2.70$, $SD = 1.09$); $t(99) = -1.141$, $p = .126$

Discussion

The present study examined whether there was a difference in sexual attraction between genders in cross-sex platonic friendships. A significant difference was not found, which implies that the sexual attraction in platonic friendships does not differ based on your biological sex.

In relation to the undergraduate class of Trinity University, the present study reveals that sexual attraction, contrary to what is portrayed by the media, is not affected by whether you are male or female. In an article by Ward (2012), it is stated that men report being more attracted to women in platonic relationships, and suggested that platonic friendships were “merely a façade.” It also reported that more men claimed they would desire sex from the friend if it were possible. The second study reported by *The Telegraph* reported similar findings, claiming that men and women were unable to sustain a platonic relationship because attraction would always be a complicating factor. These studies are on par with societal stereotypes: Men are more sexually attracted to women, and it is not possible for men and women to be friends. Based on this study, although men did report slightly higher levels of sexual attraction, there was no statistical significance, meaning there is no correlation between gender and sexual attraction. On average both men and women strongly disagreed or disagreed with the questions regarding sexual attraction. Furthermore, they reported low levels of sexual attraction among their friendships. According to this study, what is being portrayed by the media is contradictory to men and women’s views of attraction within their platonic relationship. Media portrayals on gender roles may not be entirely correct, because the social expectation for men to be more sexually attracted to women is not necessarily how men and women view their platonic relationship. They are both

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reporting relatively the same low levels of sexual attraction. It can be concluded in relation to the study that men and women do not differ in sexual attraction in their platonic cross-sex friendships.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although there was not a significant difference found between men and women and their sexual attraction towards their platonic friend, there were some limitations to the study that could have influenced the results. The sample size was relatively small, only 101 participants, and the accessibility to the participants was limited. If there were a larger sample size, then it would have been a better normal distribution. Also, a convenience sample was used and participants were contacted via the researcher's Facebook account. Having been contacted by the researcher's media sight, there is a possibility that the majority of the respondents could be from the same types of social groups and therefore could have responded similarly based on their mutual societal views. Lastly, there was not an equal representation of the undergraduate class of Trinity University. Although all grade levels were contacted, 60 percent of the respondents were freshman and only 7 percent of the population was seniors. Since the majority of the respondents were freshman, the results may not accurately portray the entire undergraduate population. Most of the previous studies, such as the one reported by Ward, report on adults, with an average age of about 22. Because the freshman class was the majority of the sample, there may not have been an accurate representation of sexual attraction in cross-sex relationships for older participants.

Although the study found that there was not a significant difference in sexual attraction between men and women, questions still remain. One question that is prevalent is if there is a difference in sexual attraction between cross-sex platonic friends based on the longevity of their relationship. The article in *The Telegraph* suggested that over time the attraction in platonic

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friendships could be a potential hardship for people in long-term romantic relationships, suggesting that the amount of time someone spends with a partner is correlated to the emotions they develop. Moreover, it is suggested that sexual attraction in platonic friendships could change over time, which could be addressed in a longitudinal study.

Theoretical conclusions

The present study contributes to the studies of cross-sex platonic friendships based on their sexual attraction. When comparing it to what the media portrays, there is an inconstancy between what is being found and what the media is reporting. While the media suggest that men are more inclined to have stronger feelings of sexual attraction towards a female platonic friend, the present study concludes that there is not a significant difference found in the sexual attraction reported amongst cross-sex platonic friends. These results have important theoretical implications regarding the ability to maintain platonic friendships free from sexual attraction. Despite what is being portrayed by social scripts and media, the possibility of having a platonic friendship is possible. On average, the study found mutual low levels of sexual attraction, because the sample similarly disagreed with the statements included in the survey. In conclusion, there are no strong findings of sexual attraction between cross-sex platonic friends, and the attraction does not differ significantly between men and women. This implies that the feeling of sexual attraction or lack thereof is mutual among the friends, and therefore they can remain platonic.

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