

Women Interact More Comfortably and Intimately With Gay Men—But Not Straight Men—After Learning Their Sexual Orientation



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Abstract

Research suggests that the development of close, opposite-sex friendships is frequently impeded by men's often one-sided sexual attraction to women. But what if this element were removed? The current research tested the hypothesis that women engage in more comfortable and intimate interactions with a gay (but not a straight) man immediately after discovering his sexual orientation. In two studies, female participants engaged in imagined or actual initial interactions with either a straight man or a gay man. After the man's sexual orientation was revealed, women (particularly attractive ones) who were paired with a gay man reported greater anticipated comfort, which was mediated by their reduced worry about his sexual intentions (Study 1). Further, once women discovered that they were interacting with a gay man, they displayed more intimate engagement behaviors with him (Study 2). These findings reveal how, and why, close relationships often form quickly between women and gay men.

Keywords

initial interactions, heterosexual women, homosexual men, sexual orientation, opposite-sex friendship, sexual attraction, open data, open materials

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In recent years, modern media have highlighted the ease with which straight women and gay men relate to one another (Mapes, 2013; Riley, 2012; Rushall, 2016). Social scientists have empirically corroborated this phenomenon by examining close friendships between straight women and gay men. They have reported that women show an increased willingness to engage in intimate conversations with gay men very early in their relationships (Grigoriou, 2004; Hopcke & Rafaty, 1999; Muraco, 2006).

Yet it remains unclear why women rapidly develop a deep engagement with gay men—but not with heterosexual men—and how this high level of rapport develops in the early stages of their relationship. One explanation is that straight women have more similarities with gay men than with straight men (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Kite & Deaux, 1987). However, there is another explanation that we think is even more important in this regard. We propose that because gay

men are not sexually attracted to women, a woman should (a) feel more comfortable interacting with a gay man immediately after discovering his sexual preference and then (b) display warmer and more intimate interaction behaviors with him that accelerate the rate at which rapport is established between them.

Whereas gay men and straight women often form platonic relationships that are firmly rooted in increased trust and mutual understanding (Grigoriou, 2004; Hopcke & Rafaty, 1999), straight women and straight men have more difficulty forming such friendships (O'Meara, 1989). A likely reason for this difference is the element of sexual attraction. Although attraction can exist in either direction in heterosexual opposite-sex

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friendships (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012), straight men, more often than women, report initiating opposite-sex friendships with the intent to gain sexual access to a woman they are sexually attracted to (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001). Women, who are likely aware of such intentions, may hesitate to intimately engage with straight men early in their relationships to avoid having their friendlier behaviors misinterpreted as signaling sexual interest (Abbey, 1982; Koenig, Kirkpatrick, & Ketelaar, 2007), which is often overperceived by straight men (Haselton & Buss, 2000).

Building on these ideas, Russell, Ta, Lewis, Babcock, and Ickes (2017) advanced the hypothesis that gay men's lack of sexual motives toward women enhances women's willingness to trust and befriend gay men. In a series of studies, Russell et al. found evidence that (a) women trust gay men more than straight men in mating contexts and (b) gay men's absence of deceptive mating-related intent contributes to women's perception of gay men's benevolence and honesty. Recently, Russell and colleagues predicted and found that physically attractive women—who are more likely to be sexually pursued and exploited by straight men—are more likely to value gay men's advice and friendship (Russell, Babcock, Lewis, Ta, & Ickes, 2018). They concluded that the overall pattern of evidence suggests that women's close relationship formation with gay men is rooted in gay men's absence of sexual motives and intentions toward women.

If gay men's lack of mating motives (i.e., absence of sexual intent) enables women to trust and befriend them more readily than straight men, could we see evidence of this close bond developing as soon as a gay man reveals his sexual orientation to a woman? We set out to answer this question by examining whether a woman's knowledge of a man's homosexual orientation contributes to her heightened feelings of comfort with him (Study 1) and, therefore, leads to an interaction that is more intimately engaging for both individuals (Study 2).

The Current Research

Here, we present the results of two studies testing the hypothesis that a more comfortable and intimate interaction should take place once a woman is aware of the sexual orientation of her gay male interaction partner. The aim of Study 1 was to examine the psychological process that leads to women's increased comfort in an initial interaction with a gay man, and the aim of Study 2 was to extend the findings of Study 1 by capturing the behavioral shift that women are predicted to exhibit once they learn of a gay man's sexual orientation. We predicted that once a gay man's sexual orientation is

revealed to a woman, the woman should not only feel more comfortable with a gay man (relative to a straight man), but she should also exhibit more intimate and engaging interaction behaviors with him that amplify the level of engagement and rapport between them both.

Study 1

In Study 1, we assessed women's anticipated comfort level in an initial interaction with a gay man versus a straight man. We predicted that women would perceive themselves to be more comfortable interacting with a gay man compared with a straight man once they possess knowledge of the man's sexual orientation. Because we hypothesized that gay men's absence of sexual intent contributes to women's heightened comfort in their presence, we predicted that women's increased comfort interacting with a gay man (relative to a straight man) would be mediated by their reduced anxiety about the man's potential sexual intent (i.e., the man trying to "come on" to them). Further, because straight men are more likely to sexually pursue and exploit women who are more physically attractive (Feingold, 1990; Russell et al., 2018), we predicted that women who perceive themselves as more attractive would be more likely to display evidence of this psychological process. Finally, we predicted that women's comfort difference with a straight man versus a gay man would not be attributable to a source of women's anxiety that is unrelated to the man's sexual intent (e.g., the man having nothing in common with them).

Method

Participants. A total of 153 heterosexual women (age: $M = 19.75$ years, $SD = 2.86$, range = 18–36) were recruited from the subject pool of a large public university in the United States and received partial course credit for their participation.¹

Measures and procedure. Participants completed the experiment online. After the participants were informed that they were taking part in a study examining their anticipated interactions with strangers, they were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions in which they imagined interacting either with a straight male stranger or with a gay male stranger.

Within each of these two conditions, we generated two scenarios that represented knowledge that either did or did not emerge during the female participant's interaction with the male stranger (either straight or gay). We created the first scenario such that the participant was not aware of the man's sexual orientation. For example, the first scenario read, "Imagine a situation

where you are sitting in a waiting room next to a male stranger. Both you and he are the only two people in the room. Then, imagine that he begins talking to you." The participant was aware of the man's sexual orientation in the second scenario, which read, "During your interaction with this man, you come to find out that this man is, in fact, [straight vs. gay]." Each participant indicated how comfortable (1 = *very uncomfortable*, 7 = *very comfortable*) she would be while interacting with the man in both the first and second scenario in sequence. Thus, each participant's perceived level of comfort was assessed both before and after the male's sexual orientation was made clear.

Next, participants were instructed to answer a set of questions pertaining to their perceived worries while interacting with the male stranger. Specifically, we first sought to assess the degree of women's anxiety about the man's potential sexual intent. Participants rated how likely it was that they would feel worried about the man (a) "hitting on you," (b) "trying to come on to you," (c) "attempting to sexualize the interaction," (d) "having a one-sided attraction towards you," and (e) "giving you sexually inappropriate looks." Last, we assessed women's anxiety about not having anything in common with the man in their anticipated interaction by instructing them to rate how likely it was that they would feel worried (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*) about (a) "having little in common with the man," (b) "having different interests than the man," and (c) "having little to discuss with the man."

Finally, to assess the women's own perceived physical attractiveness, we instructed the participants to indicate the accuracy (1 = *very inaccurate*, 5 = *very accurate*) of the following statements: (a) "I am considered attractive by others," (b) "I attract attention from potential romantic partners," (c) "I have a pleasing physique," and (d) "I dislike looking at myself in the mirror" (reverse scored).

Results

First, we performed a 2×2 mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) that tested the effects of the participants' condition (interacting with a straight man vs. a gay man, a between-subjects variable) and the participants' awareness of the man's sexual orientation (not yet known vs. known, a within-subjects variable) on the participants' expected comfort level. This analysis revealed a significant interaction between the participants' condition and their awareness of the man's sexual orientation, $F(1, 151) = 39.96, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .21$. As predicted, once the women were made aware of the man's sexual orientation, they perceived themselves to be more comfortable interacting with the gay man

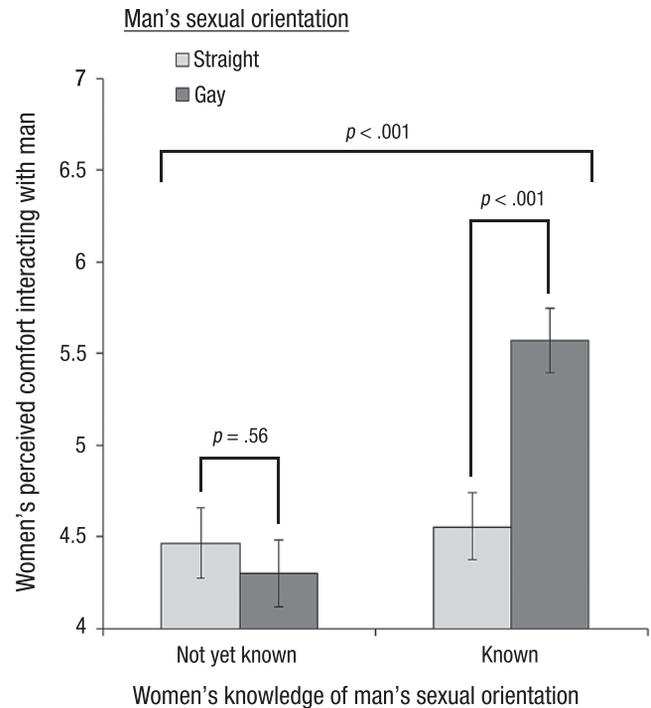


Fig. 1. Mean rating in Study 1 of women's perceived comfort with a male stranger as a function of women's explicit knowledge about the man's sexual orientation and the man's sexual orientation (straight vs. gay). Error bars represent ± 1 SE. The full scale shown on the y-axis runs from 1 to 7.

($M = 5.63, SD = 1.25$) than with the straight man ($M = 4.46, SD = 1.41$), $F(1, 151) = 29.60, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .16$ (see Fig. 1).

Next, we created composite variables of (a) women's worry about the man's sexual intentions ($\alpha = .97$), (b) women's worry about having little in common with the man ($\alpha = .89$), and (c) women's perceived attractiveness ($\alpha = .77$). To test the prediction that women's anxiety about the man's sexual intent would mediate their reported comfort when they discovered the man's sexual orientation, we performed a moderated mediation analysis (5,000 bootstrap resamples) of the pathway from the condition that the women were randomly assigned to (straight male vs. gay male partner) to their perceived comfort via the women's perceived worry about the man's sexual intent, with women's attractiveness moderating the path to their perceived worry.

The model exhibited good fit and accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in women's comfort, $R^2 = .36, F(2, 150) = 42.17, p < .001$. Women who were assigned to the gay-male condition were less likely to worry about the man's sexual intent compared with women who imagined themselves interacting with a straight man, $\beta = -0.45, SE = 0.08, p < .001$. However, this path was moderated by the women's attractiveness, $\beta = -0.14, SE = 0.07, p = .037$. Simple-slopes tests

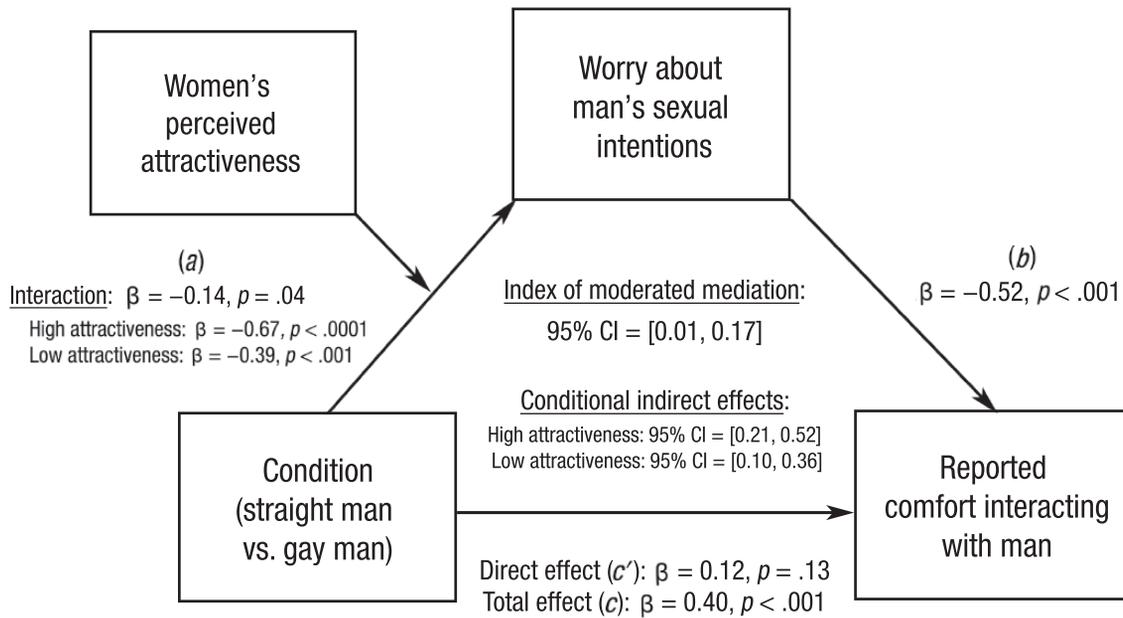


Fig. 2. Moderated mediation model from Study 1 illustrating the indirect effect of condition (straight man vs. gay man) on women's anticipated comfort interacting with the man, as mediated by their perceived worry about the man's sexual intentions and their perception of their attractiveness.

revealed (a) that the more attractive (+1 *SD*) women were more worried about the straight man's sexual intent compared with the less attractive (−1 *SD*) women, $\beta = 0.25, SE = 0.10, p = .012$, and (b) that the reduced anxiety about sexual intent in the condition with the gay man (vs. the straight man) was much stronger for the more attractive women, $\beta = -0.67, SE = 0.10, p < .0001$, relative to the less attractive women, $\beta = -0.39, SE = 0.10, p < .001$. This reduced worry then led women to feel more comfortable interacting with the man, $\beta = -0.52, SE = 0.09, p < .001$.

As predicted, although the indirect effect of condition on women's perceived comfort was statistically significant both for less attractive women, $\beta = 0.20, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI_{\beta} = [0.10, 0.36]$, and for more attractive women, $\beta = 0.35, SE = 0.08, 95\% CI_{\beta} = [0.21, 0.52]$, the significant index of moderated mediation revealed that this effect was stronger for the more attractive women, $\beta = 0.08, SE = 0.04, 95\% CI_{\beta} = [0.01, 0.17]$; in other words, more attractive—relative to less attractive—women who imagined interacting with a gay man perceived themselves to be more comfortable, and this effect was attributable to their reduced worry about his sexual intent (see Fig. 2).

Importantly, women's increased comfort was fully mediated by (less) worry about the man's sexual intentions; there was no direct effect after we controlled for the effect of this mediator ($p = .12$). Further, in support of our prediction that women's increased comfort with

gay men would not be attributable to other concerns, women's perceived worry about not having common interests with the man did not vary as a function of condition ($p = .86$).

Study 2

We designed Study 2 to extend our findings from Study 1 by examining women's actual initial interactions with either gay men or straight men, both before and after the women have explicit knowledge of the men's sexual orientation. We hypothesized that the interpersonal discomfort derived from straight men's potential sexual intent should not be a concern for women who interact with gay men. For this reason, the awareness of a man's homosexual orientation should allow women—particularly those who are more attractive—to safely express more intimate and engaging behaviors with a gay man than they would before his sexual orientation was made clear. This behavioral shift on the part of the women should encourage their gay male partners to reciprocate and display greater engagement in turn, thereby resulting in a more involving experience for both individuals.

Our specific predictions were as follows. First, we predicted that women who were paired with a gay man—but not with a straight man—would exhibit more intimate and involving verbal and nonverbal behaviors with him once his sexual orientation was made clear.

Second, we predicted that the women's increase in more intimate behaviors with gay men would be driven by their comfort, which we predicted to be greater for women who perceived themselves to be more attractive. Third, we predicted that these behavioral increases would be manifested at the dyad level such that the members of the female/gay-male dyads would exhibit more interactional involvement after the man's sexual orientation was revealed. Fourth, we predicted that the more physically attractive women would be the ones driving this expected dyad-level increase in more intimate engagement behavior. Fifth, we predicted that, following their interactions, the members of the female/gay-male dyads would report having greater rapport with each other compared with the members of the female/straight-male dyads.

Consistent with the methods used in previous investigations examining initial interactions (e.g., Ickes, 2009; Ickes, Bissonnette, Garcia, & Stinson, 1990), an experimenter escorted the two participants into a "waiting room" and then left the room so that the dyad members' unstructured interaction could be covertly video-recorded. Unlike in these previous investigations, however, the experimenter provided the occasion for each participant to indirectly reveal his or her sexual orientation to his or her interaction partner during a brief interval between two separate interaction-recording periods.

Method

Participants. Sixty-six heterosexual women and 66 men (34 heterosexual men, 32 homosexual men) with a mean age of 19.95 years ($SD = 1.99$) were recruited and randomly assigned to create two mixed-sex dyad types: (a) 34 dyads composed of a straight woman and a straight man (SW-SM) and (b) 32 dyads composed of a straight woman and a gay man (SW-GM).² Regardless of their biological gender or their sexual orientation, all subjects were required to be between the ages of 18 to 25 to participate.

Heterosexual participants were recruited via the university's experiment-management system and were compensated with partial course credit. Homosexual male participants were recruited through university events, organizations, and advertisements directed toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student population. A trained undergraduate research assistant recruited these participants in person, by phone, and via e-mail. On initial contact with each potential gay male participant, the research assistant was instructed to explain to the recruits that the researchers needed gay men to increase the diversity of the study's sample. The purpose of this statement

was to counter any tendency to assume that the study sought to recruit gay male subjects only instead of minority samples more generally. These gay male participants—most of whom were not currently enrolled in psychology courses—were entered to win a gift card for their participation.

Setting and materials. The study took place in the university's Social Interaction Laboratory, which contained five rooms: an observation room, a storage room, a control room, and two adjacent cubicles. The dyadic interactions took place in the observation room, which contained a couch and a hidden microphone behind the couch. The storage room—an unlit room directly across the hall from the observation room—contained the video camera hidden within a storage box. A small hole was cut out of a black printed area on the side of the storage box, thereby bringing the observation room within the camera's line of sight. The control room contained all the audio, video, and computer equipment used to record and store the video data from the participants' interactions.

Procedure. Two research personnel conducted each session: (a) a female research assistant (RA) and (b) a male experimenter. When the participants arrived for their session, the RA, who was kept blind to the participants' dyad type, led the participants through the steps of the procedure. The experimenter covertly audio- and video-recorded the participants during each session. The participants interacted with the RA throughout the entire session and never saw or interacted with the experimenter.

Each female participant was randomly assigned to one of the two dyad types. In other words, both the straight and the gay male participants were randomly paired with a female interaction partner. After each participant arrived at his or her respective waiting area outside of the lab, the RA first asked the participants to provide their responses to a preinteraction questionnaire (see the Supplemental Material) that contained the same four items used in Study 1 to assess their perceived physical attractiveness ($\alpha = .80$). The RA then escorted the participants into the observation room and asked them to sit on the couch.

As part of the study's cover story, the RA explained to the participants that they would be taking part in an experiment examining how two strangers convey different kinds of topic information to each other by drawing one topic from a box containing several different topics. The RA then began searching for the topic box, appearing to have misplaced it. Appearing frustrated and pressed for time, the RA apologized to the participants and informed them that she must have mistakenly left the box in the office and had to retrieve it for the experiment to continue as planned.

The RA then left the room and walked down the hall, audibly closing the outside door to the research lab behind her. During the next 5 min (which will be referred to as the dyad's *Time 1 interaction period*), the two participants were left alone in the observation room, and their verbal and nonverbal behaviors were recorded with a hidden microphone and with the concealed video camera in the storage room across the hall.

The RA returned at the end of Time 1 with a box containing many slips of paper, each slip presumably specifying a different conversation topic. However, the participants were not aware that all the slips of paper contained the same discussion topic: providing a brief description of their ideal romantic partner. The RA asked one of the participants at random to draw a topic out of the box, read it aloud, and then provide a description of his or her ideal romantic partner to the other participant. As each participant was describing his or her ideal romantic partner, the RA sat in a nearby chair pretending to be taking notes on the description. After one participant provided a description of his or her ideal romantic partner for 60 s, the RA then instructed the other participant to do the same. This activity was intended to (a) bolster the believability of the study's cover story and (b) reveal the gender that each participant was sexually attracted to.

The RA then informed both participants that she needed to "print off documents" for the next half of the experiment and that they could wait on the couch until she returned. The RA again exited the observation room. During the next 5 min (which will be referred to as the dyad's *Time 2 interaction period*), the dyad members' spontaneous interaction was again video- and audio-recorded. When the RA returned to the observation room after Time 2 concluded, the participants were asked a series of standard questions to identify any possible suspicions about being recorded.

Next, the RA seated the two participants in separate cubicles to complete the postinteraction questionnaire containing the rapport measure. The five rapport-relevant items were rated on 7-point Likert-type scales; they assessed whether the participants (a) trusted their interaction partner (e.g., "I could trust the other person"), (b) liked their interaction partner (e.g., "I liked the other person"), (c) enjoyed their interaction with their partner (e.g., "I enjoyed my interaction with the other participant"), (d) wanted to become friends with their partner (e.g., "I would like to become friends with the other person"), and (e) wanted to interact more with their interaction partner (e.g., "I would like to interact more with the other person in the future").

Finally, because it was critical that each member of each dyad type correctly identified his or her partner's

sexual orientation, a manipulation-check item was included at the end of the postinteraction questionnaire that asked them to do so.

Following the completion of the postinteraction questionnaire, the female participants were instructed to view the footage of their interaction and record the specific thoughts and feelings that they distinctly remembered having during their interaction with their male interaction partner. Participants viewed 12 min of video footage: the Time 1 interaction period (5 min), the in-between period of the participants describing their ideal romantic partners (2 min), and the Time 2 interaction period (5 min). During these viewings, participants used the pause/start button to pause the tape every time they remembered having a specific thought or feeling in their interaction. When the video was paused, the participants would record on paper (a) the specific thought or feeling that they had and (b) the specific time at which that thought or feeling occurred in the video footage. The participants were explicitly encouraged to report as accurately and honestly as possible all the thoughts and feelings that they remembered having during their interaction.

These data were later coded by an independent group of undergraduate raters (intraclass correlation coefficient [ICC] = .99) for the presence (1) or absence (0) of comfort-related thoughts and feelings that the women expressed immediately following the recording period in which the man revealed his sexual orientation. Specifically, instances were noted in which each participant reported a thought or feeling that (a) contained at least one reference to feeling comfortable in their interaction (e.g., I was feeling "comfortable," "relaxed," "at ease," "content," "less anxious") and (b) occurred immediately after the male revealed the gender that he was sexually attracted to.

Because of the possibility that women's comfort-related feelings could have been the result of gay men's more intimate self-disclosure of their sexual orientation or of positive stereotypes of gay men seeming more gentle (Madon, 1997; Taylor, 1983) or more feminine (Blashill & Powlisha, 2009), we decided to code for these attributes so we could control for their effects in our statistical model. Specifically, we instructed four female raters (who were kept blind to the manipulation of the men's sexual orientation) to view the 2-min video period when the man revealed his sexual orientation to his female interaction partner and to then rate (on 7-point Likert-type scales) whether (a) the man's disclosure was intimate (ICC = .71), (b) the man seemed gentle (ICC = .70), and (c) the man seemed feminine (ICC = .81).

Behavioral measures and ratings. Two verbal and three nonverbal behavior measures were coded from the

interaction videos by a team of raters who were blind to the interaction partners' dyad type. The raters were divided into separate groups of about 2 to 4, and each rater was trained to code one behavior at a time and was instructed to separately code the responses of each dyad member, except in those cases where the variables were inherently dyadic in nature (e.g., the frequency of mutual gazes). A few behaviors that required a measure of duration (e.g., talking, gazing) were recorded using an event recorder device, which had the capacity to record (a) the number of occurrences of the behavior, (b) the total elapsed seconds of the behavior, (c) instances of co-occurring behavior (e.g., mutual gazes), and (d) the number of seconds of the co-occurring behavior (mutual gaze). Interrater reliability statistics for each behavior were also computed within each period.

The three nonverbal behaviors that were coded included (a) each dyad member's body orientation relative to their partner (toward, away, or parallel; Time 1 ICC = .89, Time 2 ICC = .95), (b) the total frequency of positive affect (smiling or laughing) that each dyad member displayed (Time 1 ICC = .96, Time 2 ICC = .90), and (c) the total amount of time (seconds) that each dyad member looked (i.e., gazed) at his or her partner (Time 1 ICC = .99, Time 2 ICC = .99). The two verbal behaviors that were coded included (a) the total number of seconds (duration) each dyad member spent talking (Time 1 ICC = .96, Time 2 ICC = .90) and (b) the total number of seconds of directed speaking turns (i.e., speaking to one's partner while simultaneously maintaining eye gaze toward the partner; Time 1 ICC = .98, Time 2 ICC = .99).

Finally, we asked 12 undergraduate judges to rate the actual physical attractiveness of each female participant observed in the video footage. All ratings were made on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *very unattractive*, 7 = *very attractive*) and demonstrated good interrater reliability (ICC = .89).

Results

Data screening and selection. Of the original 66 dyads (132 participants), (a) the data from 3 dyads were excluded because of equipment problems that resulted in missing or unusable recordings; (b) the data from 3 other dyads were excluded, either because of suspicion that the interactions had been recorded (1 dyad) or because the dyad members did not both consent for their video-recordings to be viewed by the members of the research team (2 dyads); (c) the data from 2 other dyads were excluded because a participant misidentified the partner's sexual orientation; and (d) the data from 1 more dyad were excluded because the male member identified himself as bisexual rather than exclusively gay. Thus, 57

dyads ($n = 114$; 57 women randomly paired with 28 straight men or 29 gay men) were retained for the data analyses, the results of which are reported below.

Women's behavioral shift. To test our first prediction that the women would exhibit more positive, intimate, and engaging behaviors following their awareness of their male partner's homosexual orientation, we conducted a series of 2×2 mixed-model ANOVAs that tested the effects of the dyad type (SW-SM vs. SW-GM) and the interaction period (Time 1 vs. Time 2) on the female participants' (a) body orientation relative to her partner, (b) seconds of maintaining eye gaze at her partner, (c) seconds of speaking to her partner, (d) seconds of directed speaking to her partner, and (e) frequency of positive affect (smiling and/or laughing). Figure 3 depicts the behavior change differences between the two dyad types from Time 1 to Time 2.

As predicted, the first ANOVA revealed a significant interaction of dyad type and interaction period on women's body orientation, $F(1, 55) = 5.28, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .09$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that the women who were paired with a gay man oriented their bodies more toward their interaction partner after his sexual orientation was revealed, $F(1, 55) = 23.83, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$. In contrast, the women who were paired with a straight man did not change their body orientation from Time 1 to Time 2 ($p = .12$).

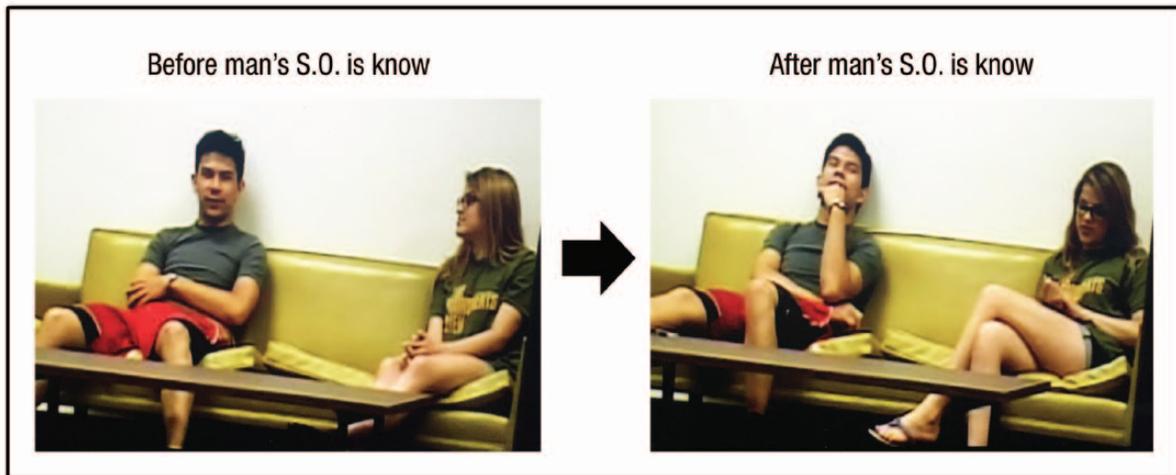
Second, a significant interaction was also obtained for how long the women looked at their male partner, $F(1, 55) = 18.28, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .25$. Women looked longer at their gay male partner during Time 2 than Time 1, $F(1, 55) = 29.63, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .35$. This change was not observed for the women in the SW-SM dyads ($p = .52$).

Third, we examined how many seconds the women spent talking with their male partner. There was a significant main effect of interaction period, $F(1, 55) = 6.16, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .10$, indicating that, regardless of dyad type, the women spoke to their partners more during Time 2 than during Time 1. However, there was no significant Condition \times Time Period interaction effect on the women's general speaking behavior ($p = .97$).

Interestingly, however, there was a significant interaction for the measure of the women's directed speaking behavior (i.e., speaking to their partner while simultaneously maintaining eye gaze toward him), $F(1, 55) = 8.34, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .13$. The women in SW-GM dyads directly spoke to their partner for a longer period of time during Time 2 than during Time 1, $F(1, 55) = 9.17, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .14$. Again, there was no such change for the women who were paired with straight men ($p = .29$).

Finally, the fifth ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect for the measure of the women's frequency

A straight woman with a straight man



A straight woman with a gay man

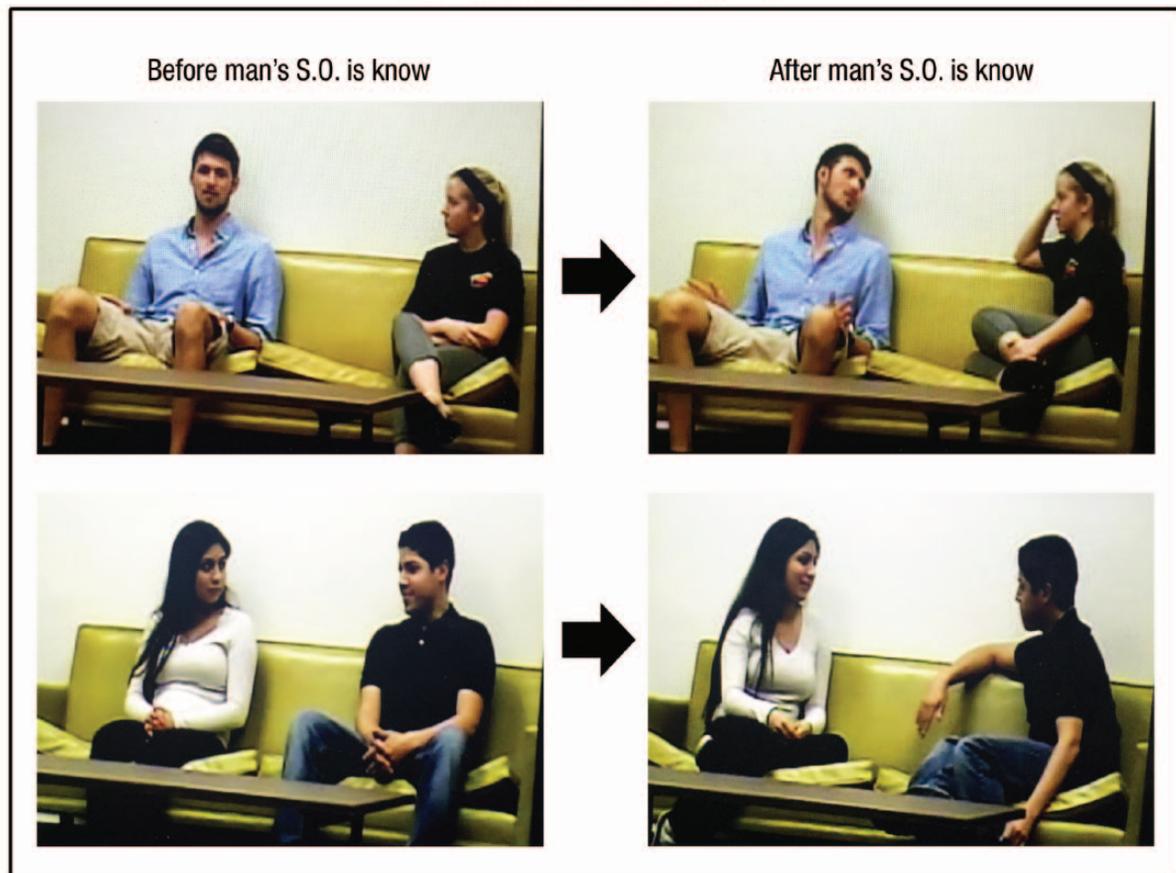


Fig. 3. Photographs from Study 2 depicting body orientation and directed speaking differences from Time 1 (left) to Time 2 (right) of a woman paired with a straight man versus a woman paired with a gay man. S.O. = sexual orientation.

of positive affect, $F(1, 55) = 11.75, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .18$. The women in the SW-GM dyads exhibited increased instances of laughing and/or smiling behaviors during the Time 2 interaction period, $F(1, 55) = 21.62, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .28$. Within the SW-SM dyads, however, the women did not exhibit any change in their positive affect between the two interaction periods ($p = .81$). See Figure 4 for an illustration of the behavior changes.

Women's comfort and their intimate engagement shift.

To test our next prediction that the more attractive women's feelings of comfort immediately after learning of their partner's sexual orientation would mediate the increase in their more intimate engagement behaviors with gay men (i.e., body orientation and directed speaking), we conducted a moderated mediation analysis (5,000 bootstrap resamples) in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). In this analysis, we tested for an indirect effect of the women's partner type (straight vs. gay) on the change in their behavior from the Time 1 period to the Time 2 period via feelings of comfort for the women who perceived themselves to be more attractive. We also included the ratings of men's femininity, gentleness, and perceived intimacy as covariates in our model, thereby enabling us to test the pathway from women's partner type to their comfort level via each of these covariates.

Converging with our findings from Study 1, the average percentage of comfort-related feelings reported by the women who interacted with gay men was greater (44.83%) than the average percentage for women who interacted with the straight men (10.71%), $\beta = 0.36, SE = 0.17, p = .033$. Although the perceived gentleness of the men did not differ by their sexual orientation ($p = .68$), the gay men were perceived to be more intimate, $\beta = 0.36, SE = 0.12, p = .003$, and more feminine, $\beta = 0.64, SE = 0.10, p < .001$, than the straight men when they revealed who they were sexually attracted to. Interestingly, though, none of these covariates predicted women's comfort-related feelings after the men's sexual orientation was revealed (all $ps \geq .27$).

However, the interaction between the women's perceived attractiveness and their partner type did predict women's comfort-related feelings, $\beta = 0.33, SE = 0.17, p = .05$. Simple-slopes tests revealed that, as predicted, the women who perceived themselves to be more attractive (+1 *SD*) were more likely to report comfort-related feelings when they were paired with a gay man compared with a straight man, $\beta = 0.58, SE = 0.19, p = .002$. This effect was not observed for the women who perceived themselves to be less attractive (-1 *SD*), $p = .55$. Next, although these comfort-related feelings did not predict women's change in laughing/smiling,

general speaking, or general eye-gaze behavior (all $ps \geq .25$),³ they did significantly predict women's more intimate behavior changes: women's increase in body orientation toward their partner, $\beta = 0.42, SE = 0.13, p = .001$, and women's increase in directed speaking to their partner, $\beta = 0.41, SE = 0.12, p = .001$. As predicted, the first indirect effect of the partner type (straight vs. gay) on women's directed speaking change via women's comfort was statistically significant for the more attractive women, $\beta = 0.29, SE = 0.08, 95\% CI_\beta = [0.06, 0.61]$. There was no such indirect effect among women who perceived themselves to be less attractive, $95\% CI_\beta = [-0.16, 0.31]$. Similarly, the second indirect effect of the partner type on women's body orientation change via women's comfort was also statistically significant for the women who perceived themselves to be more attractive, $\beta = 0.28, SE = 0.09, 95\% CI_\beta = [0.05, 0.67]$, but not for the women who perceived themselves to be less attractive, $95\% CI_\beta = [-0.18, 0.30]$ (see Fig. 5).

Behavioral shift at the dyad level. Although we found that women increased their intimate behaviors following the reveal of the gay—but not straight—man's sexual orientation, we predicted that this increase in engagement would be manifested at the dyad level such that the gay men would also exhibit greater behavioral involvement compared with the straight men following the reveal of their respective sexual orientations. Because we found that women's perceptions of their attractiveness moderated the pathway to their more intimate behavior shift, we also tested whether women's actual physical attractiveness was moderating this shift at the dyad level.⁴

To test for this possibility, we used hierarchical linear modeling in Mplus. Specifically, we structured the data as 57 sets of two individuals who were nested within their respective dyads and whose responses were treated as interdependent. This data structure enabled us to apportion the variance to the between-dyads factor of dyad type (SW-SM vs. SW-GM) and to the within-dyad factors of interaction period (Time 1 vs. Time 2) and women's actual attractiveness, while controlling for the dyad members' gender (male vs. female). Specifically, we predicted that (a) both SW-GM dyad members would show an increase in these behaviors from Time 1 to Time 2, (b) each member within the SW-GM dyads would display more of these behaviors than the comparable member within the SW-SM dyads after sexual orientation was revealed (i.e., Time 2), and (c) the more intimate engagement change (i.e., directly speaking to partner) would interact with women's actual (i.e., objectively rated) attractiveness, such that the more physically attractive women would be driving this effect.

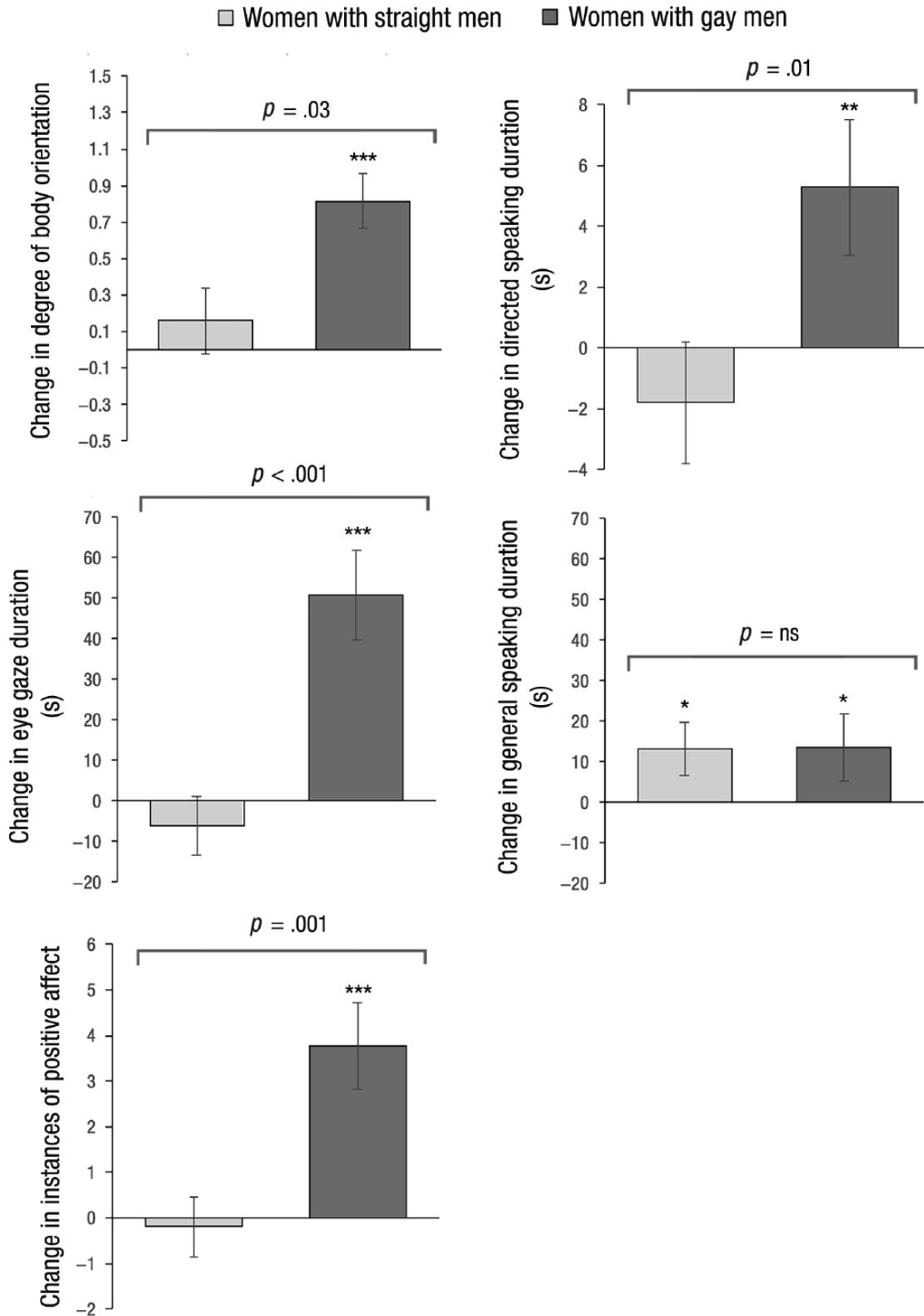


Fig. 4. Women's mean behavior changes in Study 2 from Time 1 to Time 2 as a function of the sexual orientation of the man they interacted with. Asterisks above error bars indicate a significant behavior change from Time 1 to Time 2 ($*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$). Values above brackets indicate the extent to which there was a significant difference between dyads. Error bars represent $\pm 1 SE$.

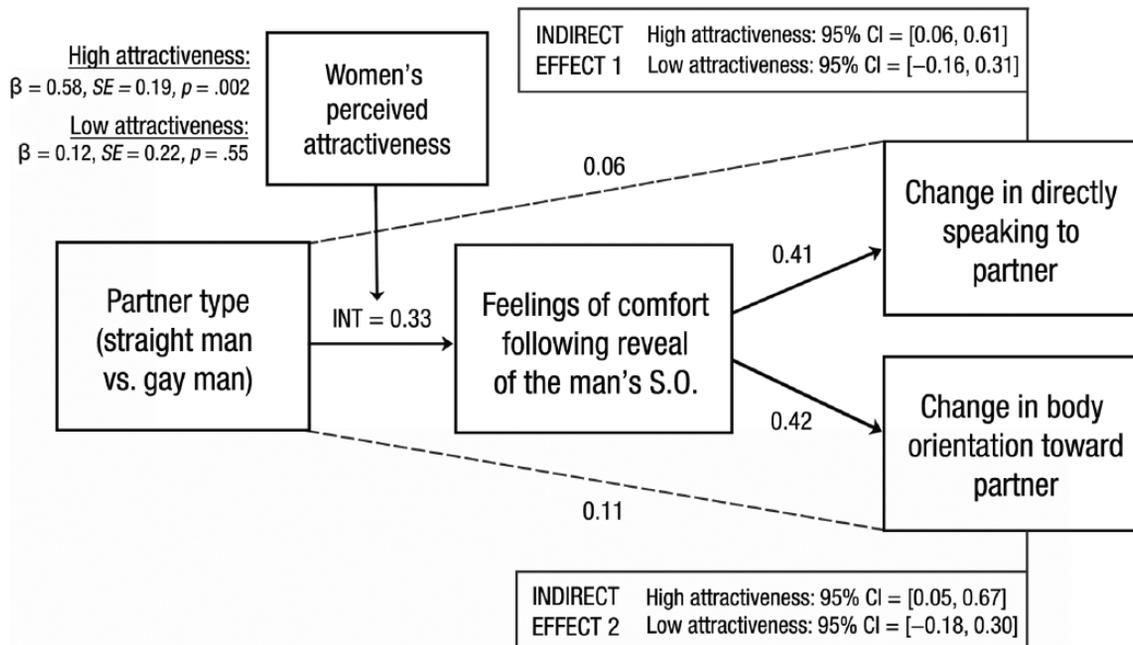


Fig. 5. Path model from Study 2 illustrating the two indirect effects of partner type on women's direct speaking change and body orientation change through their feelings of comfort, which were moderated by the women's perceived attractiveness. Values along paths are standardized coefficients. The dashed lines represent paths with nonsignificant coefficients after controlling for the mediator (comfort). INT = interaction effect; S.O. = sexual orientation.

Dyad-level behavior changes. Our analysis revealed the predicted interaction (Dyad Type \times Interaction Period) for all four behavioral measures: (a) degree of body orientation, $\beta = 0.48$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [0.31, 0.65]$; (b) the positive affect behaviors, $\beta = 0.36$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .004$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [0.12, 0.60]$; (c) the duration (in seconds) of gazing behavior toward the partner, $\beta = 0.35$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .002$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [0.12, 0.57]$; and (d) the duration (in seconds) of directed speaking to the partner, $\beta = 0.28$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .005$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [0.09, 0.48]$. We report the simple slopes for each behavior that we analyzed.

First, the members of the SW-GM dyads oriented their bodies more toward each other during Time 2 than they had during Time 1, $\beta = 0.53$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [0.42, 0.64]$. Although the members of the SW-SM dyads also oriented their bodies slightly more toward each other during Time 2 than Time 1, $\beta = 0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .004$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [0.02, 0.12]$, the amount of this change was significantly greater for the SW-GM dyads, $\beta = 0.62$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [0.39, 0.85]$. Second, the members of the SW-GM dyads displayed a significant increase in their positive affect from Time 1 to Time 2, $\beta = 0.40$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [0.24, 0.56]$; however, this effect was not significant for the members of the SW-SM dyads ($p = .95$). Third, the members of the SW-GM dyads spent more time looking at each other during Time 2

compared with Time 1, $\beta = 0.38$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [0.21, 0.55]$. In contrast, there was no significant change in this variable for the members of the SW-SM dyads ($p = .78$). Fourth, whereas the SW-GM dyad members displayed the predicted significant increase in the duration of directed speaking, $\beta = 0.27$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .008$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [0.07, 0.47]$, the SW-SM dyad members exhibited a significant decrease in this behavior, $\beta = -0.04$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .006$, 95% $CI_{\beta} = [-0.07, -0.01]$.

The results of the second set of simple-slopes analyses (see Table 1) revealed that, during Time 2, each SW-GM dyad member exhibited greater intimate behavior compared with the comparable member of the SW-SM dyad. Not only did the women in SW-GM dyads exhibit more intimate and engaging behavior than the women in the SW-SM dyads, but the gay men also showed more intimate behavior compared with the straight men, supporting our prediction that gay men would feel comfortable reciprocating these interaction behaviors.

Intimate engagement change and women's actual attractiveness. Next, we tested for the presence of a significant three-way interaction between the dyad type, the interaction period, and the women's actual (i.e., objectively rated) attractiveness on each dyad member's behavior. Although we did not find evidence of this three-way

Table 1. Behavior Differences After Sexual Orientation Was Known in Study 2

Interaction behavior	Women with straight men	Women with gay men	Simple-slopes statistic		Straight men	Gay men	Simple-slopes statistic	
	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	β	95% CI $_{\beta}$	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	β	95% CI $_{\beta}$
Directed speaking (in seconds)	5.88 (1.21)	19.38 (2.67)	0.77 (0.08)***	[0.61, 0.94]	2.12 (0.58)	14.31 (2.81)	0.75 (0.07)***	[0.61, 0.89]
General eye gaze (in seconds)	70.98 (9.30)	174.99 (14.56)	0.74 (0.08)***	[0.60, 0.89]	74.59 (11.54)	157.60 (13.84)	0.68 (0.09)***	[0.50, 0.85]
Body orientation toward partner	0.40 (0.10)	1.17 (0.23)	0.64 (0.14)***	[0.36, 0.92]	0.24 (0.06)	1.47 (0.27)	0.79 (0.09)***	[0.62, 0.96]
Instances of positive affect	8.43 (0.76)	12.58 (0.80)	0.51 (0.10)***	[0.31, 0.70]	7.64 (0.85)	11.11 (1.06)	0.45 (0.13)**	[0.20, 0.71]

Note: Standard errors are given in parentheses. CI = confidence interval.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

interaction for changes in general gazing, body orientation, or laughing/smiling behavior (all $ps \geq .48$), we did find it for the shift in the more intimate engagement behavior of each dyad member directly speaking to his or her partner, $\beta = 0.196$, $SE = 0.097$, $p = .043$, 95% CI $_{\beta} = [0.01, 0.39]$.

To probe and interpret this interaction, we first computed difference scores by subtracting each partner's directed speaking duration at Time 1 from the corresponding measure at Time 2 and then tested whether women's actual attractiveness was driving the difference in positive engagement change between the two dyad types (SW-SM vs. SW-GM), while still statistically controlling for the gender of each dyad member. As expected, the model revealed the previously noted

two-way interaction between dyad type and women's actual attractiveness on each dyad member's change in their directed speaking behavior, $\beta = 0.30$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .026$, 95% CI $_{\beta} = [0.04, 0.56]$.

To see whether this two-way interaction was further moderated by the women's attractiveness, we conducted simple-slopes analyses at low ($-1 SD$) and high ($+1 SD$) levels of women's objectively rated attractiveness. As predicted, relative to the corresponding SW-SM dyads, SW-GM dyads that included the more physically attractive women displayed the greatest positive change in the duration that they directly spoke to one another after the man revealed his sexual orientation, $\beta = 0.74$, $SE = 0.27$, $p = .007$, 95% CI $_{\beta} = [0.21, 0.99]$ (see Fig. 6).

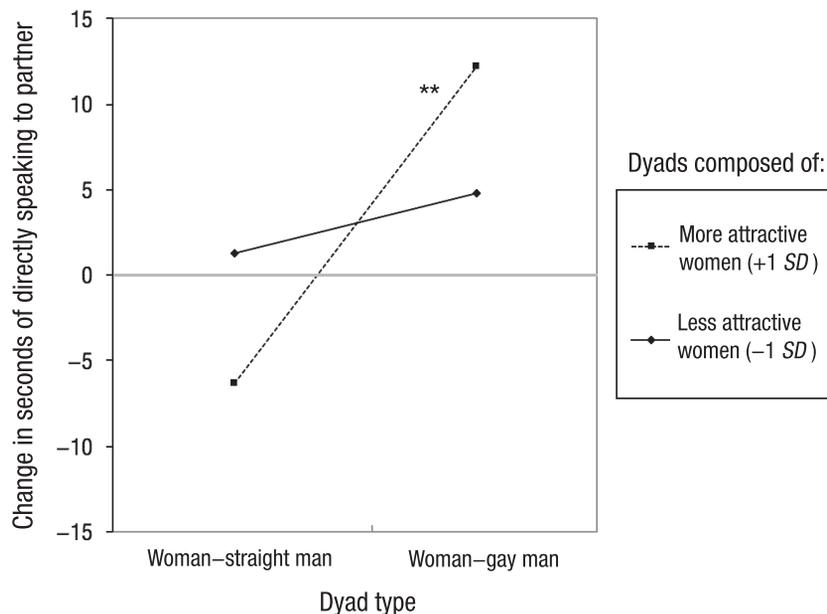


Fig. 6. Mean change in the duration in Study 2 from Time 1 to Time 2 that dyad members directly spoke to their partners as a function of the dyad type and the women's actual physical attractiveness. Asterisks indicate that the slope was significant ($p < .01$).

In contrast, the SW-GM dyads with the less attractive women did not exhibit a significant change in their directed speaking engagement compared with the corresponding SW-SM dyads ($p = .36$). This finding is consistent with our prediction that the physically attractive women would be able to express more intimate engagement behavior with a gay man without having to experience the awkwardness or discomfort of interacting with a straight man who could be sexually attracted to them.

Simultaneously occurring behaviors. To further test our prediction that some of these behavioral increases were mutual and occurring simultaneously within each dyad, we also kept track of the frequency and duration of behaviors that could potentially co-occur: instances of simultaneous laughing and/or smiling (i.e., mutual positive affect) and instances of simultaneous gazing at one's partner (i.e., mutual gazes). Because these data were not nested, we conducted two mixed-model ANOVAs to test for evidence of the predicted interaction effect (Dyad Type \times Interaction Period) in these two dyad-level measures.

Two significant Dyad Type \times Interaction Period interactions emerged in these analyses. The first interaction, $F(1, 55) = 15.47, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .22$, revealed that mutual positive affect was significantly greater during the Time 2 interaction period than during the Time 1 interaction period in the SW-GM dyads, $F(1, 55) = 27.27, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .33$. In contrast, this difference was not observed in the SW-SM dyads ($p = .70$). The second interaction effect, $F(1, 55) = 20.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .27$, revealed that the total seconds of mutual gazes were significantly greater in Time 2 than in Time 1 for the SW-GM dyads, $F(1, 55) = 36.86, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .40$. However, this increase in mutual gaze was not observed in the SW-SM dyads ($p = .67$).

Interpersonal rapport. Finally, we predicted that the members of the SW-GM dyads—and, particularly, the women within these dyads—would experience increased interpersonal rapport compared with the members of the SW-SM dyads. To test this prediction, we first computed a composite interpersonal rapport score by averaging the rapport-relevant measures (e.g., perceived trust; $\alpha = .90$). We used hierarchical linear modeling to determine whether both members of SW-GM dyads reported having increased rapport with one another, controlling for the within-dyad variation of the two partners.

This analysis revealed a two-way interaction between the dyad type and the dyad member's gender, $\beta = 0.34, SE = 0.13, p = .009, 95\% CI_\beta = [0.08, 0.59]$ (see Fig. 7). Simple-slopes tests revealed that, as predicted, rapport was higher for (a) the gay men compared with the straight men, $\beta = 0.62, SE = 0.19, p = .001, 95\% CI_\beta =$

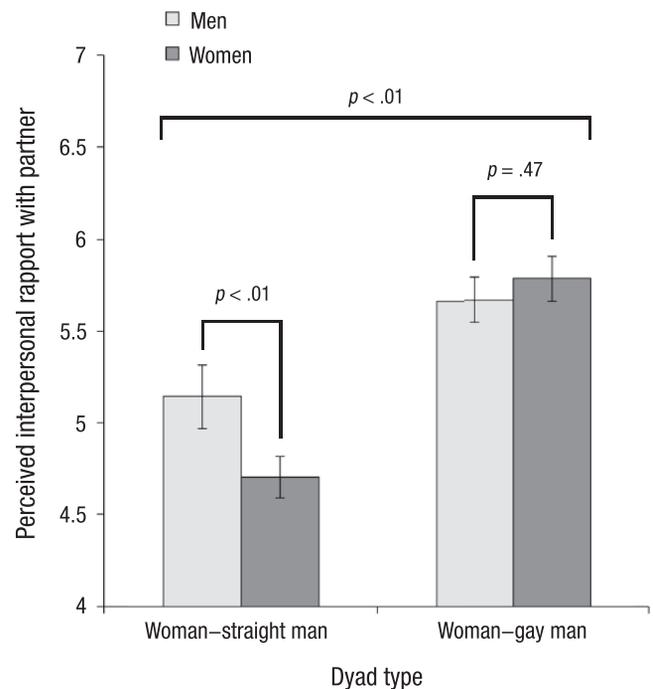


Fig. 7. Mean perceived interpersonal rapport with their partner in Study 2 as a function of the dyad type and the participant's gender. Error bars represent $\pm 1 SE$. The scale on the y-axis runs from 1 to 7.

[0.26, 0.99] and (b) the women who interacted with a gay man compared with the women who interacted with a straight man, $\beta = 0.86, SE = .08, p < .001, 95\% CI_\beta = [0.69, 0.99]$. Although these comparably high levels of rapport did not differ between the SW-GM dyad members ($p = .47$), the female participants who interacted with straight men reported having lower levels of rapport than those reported by their straight male partners, $\beta = -0.31, SE = 0.10, p = .003, 95\% CI_\beta = [-0.51, -0.10]$. In other words, women reported similar levels of high rapport with their gay male interaction partner, whereas this was not the case for women who had a straight male interaction partner.

General Discussion

Previous research findings have shown that, in opposite-sex friendships, women are more likely to trust and confide in gay men than in straight men (Grigoriou, 2004; Hopcke & Rafaty, 1999; Muraco, 2006). Russell and his colleagues have consistently found that this difference is linked to the absence of gay men's attraction and mating intentions toward women (Russell, DelPriore, Butterfield, & Hill, 2013; Russell et al., 2017, 2018). In the current research, we found that the explicit knowledge of a man's sexual preference not only increased women's comfort with a gay man (vs. a straight man), but also affected the degree to which the women

(particularly attractive ones) were willing to engage with a gay man at a more intimate level. Our results also provided evidence that this increased engagement was mutual; gay men responded to the women's more intimate interaction behavior by displaying the same behaviors. Moreover, these behaviors exhibited between women and gay men were complemented by each participant's high level of rapport, providing evidence that the interactions were perceived to be more intimately engaging by the participants themselves.

These converging findings provide a novel perspective on the initial encounters of opposite-sex strangers. Previous research has revealed that initial interactions between the sexes are, in general, not particularly intimate (Morton, 1978) and that the development of trusting friendships between these individuals is typically slow and, in some cases, can take months or even years (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Rose, 1985). The current findings indicate a dramatic exception to this general pattern by demonstrating that women—particularly those who are more attractive—can quickly develop close, trusting friendships with gay men, beginning even within their relationship's earliest moments. These findings therefore invite a more wide-ranging exploration of related questions. For example, how often and in what circumstances do the initial interactions between straight women and gay men lead to more lasting friendships that also evidence heightened levels of intimacy, interpersonal trust, and mutual respect?

It is important to note that the plausible alternative explanations (e.g., greater similarity of interests, gay men being more gentle or feminine) for women's friendship with gay men cannot explain (a) the mediation effects we found in Study 1 and Study 2, (b) why the more attractive women were driving these effects across the two studies, (c) why the explicit knowledge of the male partner's sexual orientation made such a dramatic difference in Study 2 (even after we controlled for the men's femininity, the men's gentleness, and the more intimate disclosure of their sexual orientation), and (d) the pattern of findings from previous research explaining why women trust and befriend gay men (Russell et al., 2017, 2018). Although these specific attributes may play some role in the development of friendships between women and gay men, our results provide strong and consistent evidence that the absence of gay men's sexual attraction and intent toward women is the early and powerful icebreaker for the development of intimacy and engagement in these opposite-sex relationships.

Future research might examine whether closer and more trusting interactions are also evident in other gay-straight combinations. For example, would a straight man and a lesbian woman become more intimate immediately after the man discovers her sexual orientation?

We have reason to believe that they would not, considering the differences in men's and women's evolved mating strategies. Given the evidence that straight men, on average, are more sexually eager than women (Schmitt et al., 2003) and are also more likely to engage in opportunistic sexual encounters (Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Li & Kenrick, 2006), a straight man who discovers that he is interacting with a lesbian woman is unlikely to feel the same degree of comfort and desire for friendship in response to her complete lack of sexual attraction and interest. Thus, the key antecedent that we hypothesize to stimulate the increase in intimate engagement within straight female-gay male interactions may be absent between straight men and lesbian women. We therefore suspect that the formation of closer, opposite-sex friendships is specific and more common to straight women and gay men. In any event, we believe that this research takes an important first step toward understanding the fundamental interpersonal processes that influence friendship formation between straight and gay individuals.

Action Editor

Bill von Hippel served as action editor for this article.

Author Contributions

E. M. Russell developed the hypotheses, designed the studies, led the research protocol, analyzed the data for both studies, and wrote the manuscript. W. Ickes assisted with the study design and assisted with the manuscript preparation and revisions. V. P. Ta assisted with creating the tables and figures, prepared the data sets for the analyses, and assisted with manuscript revisions.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

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Open Practices



All data and materials have been made publicly available via the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at <https://>

osf.io/tn3y5/. The complete Open Practices Disclosure for this article can be found at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0956797617733803>. This article has received badges for Open Data and Open Materials. More information about the Open Practices badges can be found at <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/publications/badges>.

Notes

1. For Study 1, sample size was chosen on the basis of Cohen's (1988) recommendation that at least 50 participants be tested within each condition to achieve 80% power. We estimated a medium effect size because previous research examining women's trust in gay men produced effects ranging from medium to large (Russell, DelPriore, Butterfield, & Hill, 2013; Russell et al., 2017). To be conservative, we chose a medium—rather than large—effect size to estimate our sample.

2. For Study 2, a statistical power analysis was performed for sample-size estimation on the basis of data from a pilot study ($N = 12$) that compared the self-reported rapport of 6 women paired with 3 straight men to that of women who were paired with 3 gay men. The effect size in this pilot study was large using Cohen's (1988) criteria. With an alpha of .05 and power of 0.80, the projected sample size of women needed to achieve this effect size in the present study was approximately 46 (23 women paired with straight men and 23 women paired with gay men for this between-dyads comparison). Thus, our total sample size ($N = 132$) consisting of 66 women (34 paired with straight men, 32 paired with gay men) was adequate to test the current hypotheses and allowed for instances of attrition or events leading to participant exclusion.

3. Although we did not find significant mediation of these behaviors via women's comfort, we did find that (a) women's body orientation change was related to their increased gazing behavior during Time 2, $r(55) = .49, p < .001$, and that (b) their directed speaking change was related to their increased laughing/smiling behaviors during Time 2, $r(55) = .30, p = .02$, providing evidence that the more intimate behavior changes were leading to more gazing and laughing/smiling instances after the man's sexual orientation was revealed.

4. For two reasons, we expected that women's objectively rated attractiveness would more directly affect the men's reciprocal engagement behavior with their female interaction partners (particularly within the SW-SM dyads) and that it would be the more effective predictor at the dyad level. First, the men should be more likely to notice and respond to the women's actual attractiveness than to their self-perceived attractiveness. Second, because the behaviors of the male and female partners are highly interdependent at the dyad level, the men's response to the women's actual attractiveness should—directly or indirectly—affect both partners' behavior.

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