

Women Warm Up Faster to Gay Men Than Straight Guys, Study Suggests

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It's a tale as old as time, or at least romantic comedies: girl meets guy, guy falls in love, girl realizes they really can't "just be friends." Research in [*Psychological Science*](#) suggests, however, that discussing matters of the heart can be the start of something beautifully platonic between the sexes – so long as the male isn't interested in more.

In a pair of studies on the intimacy of interactions between over 200 heterosexual women and their male conversation partners, researchers found that the women had friendlier, more open interactions with gay men who disclosed their sexual orientation compared to men who revealed that they were straight.

Women often avoid intimately engaging with male acquaintances due to concerns that the man may misinterpret friendliness as flirtation or even sexual interest, said Eric M. Russell, a research associate at the University of Texas at Arlington.

"When these women discover that they are interacting with gay men, this anxiety is greatly reduced in that the women no longer feel pressured to suppress their more open and involving interaction

behaviors,” Russell said.

In the first study, 153 heterosexual female college students completed an online survey in which they were asked to imagine sitting alone in a waiting room with either a straight or gay male stranger. The participants were then asked to rate their comfort throughout the hypothetical interaction both before and after they learned the man’s sexual orientation.

On average, women reported feeling slightly more at ease after learning the man was straight, but significantly more comfortable when the man turned out to be gay. The more attractive a woman reported perceiving herself to be, the larger the effect, suggesting the difference in comfort may be directly attributed to concerns about the man’s sexual interest, the authors wrote.

“Women can engage more openly and intimately with [gay men] because they do not have to worry about the men having an ulterior sexual motive,” says Russell. “This is especially true of physically attractive women who are often wary of straight men wanting more than a platonic relationship with them.”

A follow-up study of 66 heterosexual women’s face-to-face interactions with 34 homosexual and 32 heterosexual men supported these findings. The student dyads, who were told they were participating in a study on how strangers convey information about different topics, were covertly filmed throughout three distinct interaction periods.

In the first period, a research assistant claimed to have “forgotten” a box of randomized conversation topics in her office. The conversation partners were then left alone in the observation room for the next 5 minutes, providing the researchers a baseline record of the dyad’s interactions before they became aware of each other’s sexual orientations.

In the second period, the research assistant had one of the participants draw a slip of paper from the box, all of which asked them to describe his or her ideal romantic partner. This prompted the participants to reveal the gender that they were attracted to, leading to the third period of the experiment in which they were left alone in the room again while the assistant “printed off some documents.”

Post-interaction, both members of straight woman-gay man (SW-GM) dyads reported higher levels of interpersonal rapport with their partner than those in straight woman-straight man (SW-SM) dyads. Upon reviewing the 12 minutes of video footage, female participants also reported over 30% more comfort-related feelings toward their gay conversation partners.

This more intimate level of engagement was also evident in the women’s body language, with those in SW-GM pairings facing their partner more directly and maintaining eye contact over twice as long as those in SW-SM pairings.

“Straight women and gay men likely see their friendships as safe spaces where they can have fun, be themselves, and engage in intimate conversations without fear of judgement, expectations, or one-sided sexual interest,” says Russell.

These findings, he adds, raise many new and exciting questions about whether the higher levels of

intimacy, trust, and mutual respect exhibited by SW-GM dyads in the lab really translate into closer friendships, or may even serve as a prejudice-reduction mechanism for women with less positive attitudes about LGBT individuals.

Reference

Russell, E. M., Ickes, W., & Ta, V. P. (2018). Women Interact More Comfortably and Intimately With Gay Men—But Not Straight Men—After Learning Their Sexual Orientation. *Psychological Science*, 29(2), 288-303. doi:10.1177/0956797617733803