Background
Research suggests that sexual attraction and mating motives sometimes play a role in the initiation and development of young adults’ opposite-sex friendships (Affi & Faulkner, 2008; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001). Studies also suggest that young adults’ mating motives and mating strategies are strongly influenced by romantic attraction. As young adults and within each sex, a consistent pattern emerged: females expected to contribute more to the maintenance of their opposite-sex relationships than middle-aged adults. As young adults, their rate of maintaining their opposite-sex relationships is higher than that of middle-aged adults. Young adults who rated higher than middle-aged adults on the 2-tailed independent samples t test was equal to .05. The only variable rated more highly by middle-aged adults was “We are co-workers.”

As shown in Figure 1, young adults rated items linked to romantic attraction and flirtation, on average, as contributing a moderate amount to maintaining the friendship; middle-aged adults’ rating was lower. When we compiled four items that assessed attraction to and flirtation (1 = not important, 2 = highly important), we found that our current group was more likely to be involved in long-term relationships than young adults are, we predicted that they would report higher levels of romantic attraction toward their opposite-sex friends than women in our current sample. Such a test would require a comparison of opposite-sex attractiveness to their opposite-sex friends was lower than young adults’. Their scores still spanned the full range (1 to 9), and variation in their scores was linked systematically with their own romantic relationship satisfaction. In fact, for middle-aged women, more attraction to friend also predicted a desire to spend more time with their friend. In other analyses, we included people with this dataset, we found that men and women perceive jealousy from their romantic partners as a primary way that opposite-sex friendships can complicate their lives Perhaps that jealousy is not unfounded.

Method
Participants
A total of 249 adults participated. The young adult sample included 82 men and 66 women ages 18 to 23 (mean = 19.34 years) from a Midwestern university; they participated in return for credit toward a course requirement. Of these 107 young adults, 38% were currently involved in a committed romantic relationship. By post mail, we invited 323 other adults from around the United States to participate. After the initial mailing and a postcard reminder, we received 142 questionnaires back in the mail (response rate of 44%). This middle-aged adult sample included 52 men and 90 women ages 27 to 52 (mean = 37.37 years). Of these 142 adults, 90% were involved in a committed relationship; the majority were married.

Materials
As part of a broader questionnaire on friendship, participants reported on a current opposite-sex friend (OSF) of theirs who was not a romantic partner or family member (by blood or marriage). They reported on various aspects of this friendship, including degree of romantic attraction toward their friend and degree of romantic attraction from their friend. They also rated (from Not at all to Very much) each of these 34 degrees to the degree to which it contributed to maintaining the friendship.

Main Findings
Participants rated 32 different items for the degree to which they contributed to maintaining the opposite-sex friendship. Figure 1, with error bars reflecting 95% confidence intervals of the means, displays the results from a few of those items, ranging from one of the highest-rated items to one of the lowest-rated items. Both factors of the variables were significant for young adults rated nearly every reason as a stronger contributor to the maintenance of their opposite-sex friendship than did middle-aged adults (two-tailed independent samples t ps < .05). The only variable rated more highly by middle-aged adults was “We are co-workers.”

As shown in Figure 1, young adults rated items linked to romantic attraction and flirtation, on average, as contributing a moderate amount to maintaining the friendship; middle-aged adults’ rating was lower. When we compiled four items that assessed attraction to and flirtation (1 = not important, 2 = highly important), we found that our current group was more likely to be involved in long-term relationships than young adults are, we predicted that they would report higher levels of romantic attraction toward their opposite-sex friends than women in our current sample. Such a test would require a comparison of opposite-sex attractiveness to their opposite-sex friends was lower than young adults’. Their scores still spanned the full range (1 to 9), and variation in their scores was linked systematically with their own romantic relationship satisfaction. In fact, for middle-aged women, more attraction to friend also predicted a desire to spend more time with their friend. In other analyses, we included people with this dataset, we found that men and women perceive jealousy from their romantic partners as a primary way that opposite-sex friendships can complicate their lives Perhaps that jealousy is not unfounded.

Results
Our findings on reasons for maintaining opposite-sex friendships suggest that middle-aged adults have less reason to maintain their opposite-sex friendships than young adults do. Under the assumption that opposite-sex friendships occur, at least in part, because of the mateship potential they might bring, we speculate that much of the age difference in mateship maintenance is tied to an age difference in romantic relationship involvement (90% of our middle-aged adults, and only 38% of our young adults, were involved). Unfortunately, we cannot test this possibility with our current sample. Such a test would require a comparison of opposite-sex attractiveness to their opposite-sex friends was lower than young adults’. Their scores still spanned the full range (1 to 9), and variation in their scores was linked systematically with their own romantic relationship satisfaction. In fact, for middle-aged women, more attraction to friend also predicted a desire to spend more time with their friend. In other analyses, we included people with this dataset, we found that men and women perceive jealousy from their romantic partners as a primary way that opposite-sex friendships can complicate their lives. Perhaps that jealousy is not unfounded.

References


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