



# Attraction and Flirtation in Young Adults' and Middle-Aged Adults' Opposite-Sex Friendships

Erin E. Hirsch, Cierra A. Micke, and April Bleske-Rechek  
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

## Background

Research suggests that sexual attraction and mating motives sometimes play a role in the initiation and development of young adults' opposite-sex friendships (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001). Studies also suggest that young adult men experience greater levels of sexual attraction to their opposite-sex friends than women do (e.g., Kaplan & Keys, 1997). Although reports of sexual attraction and sexual tension have been documented in middle-aged adult samples as well (Sapadin, 1988), no one has investigated whether sexual attraction is as strong among middle-aged adults as among young adults, and whether sexual attraction is linked to friendship maintenance in middle-age. Because middle-aged adults are more likely to be involved in long-term mateships than young adults are, we predicted that they would report lower levels of romantic attraction toward their opposite-sex friends than would young adults. However, to the extent that men and women experience attraction toward their opposite-sex friend, they should perceive that attraction as a reason for maintaining the friendship. Finally, under the assumptions that relationship dissatisfaction might lead one to stray, and that attraction to another might lead to relationship dissatisfaction, we hypothesized that men and women who experienced higher levels of romantic attraction toward their opposite-sex friend would be less satisfied in their current mateship.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 249 adults participated. The young adult sample included 42 men and 65 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 32 reasons for the degree to which it contributed to maintaining the friendship.

## Main Findings

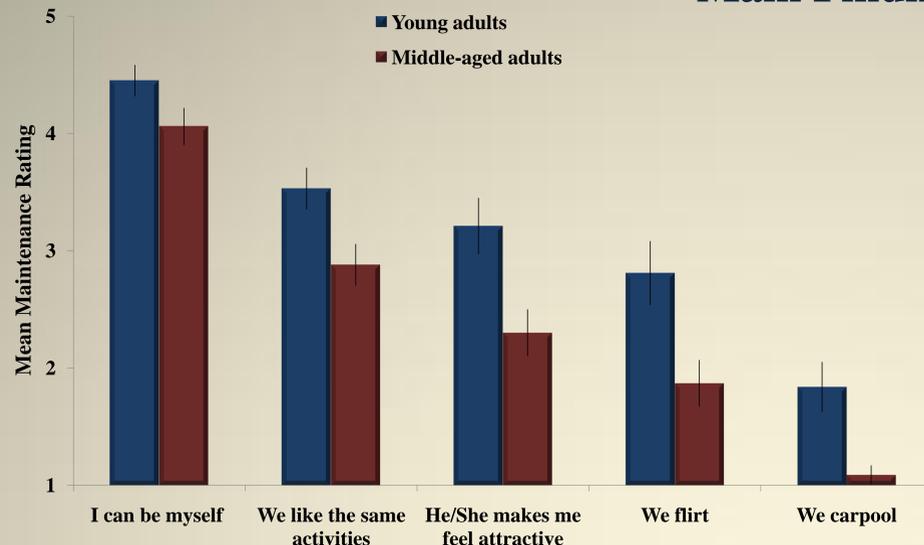


Figure 1: Young adults' and middle-aged adults' reasons for maintaining their opposite-sex friendship.

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 mean, 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 across the sexes and within each sex, a consistent pattern emerged: 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' ratings were lower. When we compiled four items that assessed attraction and flirtation (I am physically attracted to him/her; s/he makes me feel attractive; s/he is attractive; we flirt;  $\alpha = .89$ ), young adult men's ratings were higher than were young adult women's (and also higher than middle-aged men's and women's ratings),  $p = .04$ . Middle-aged men and women did not differ,  $p = .52$ .

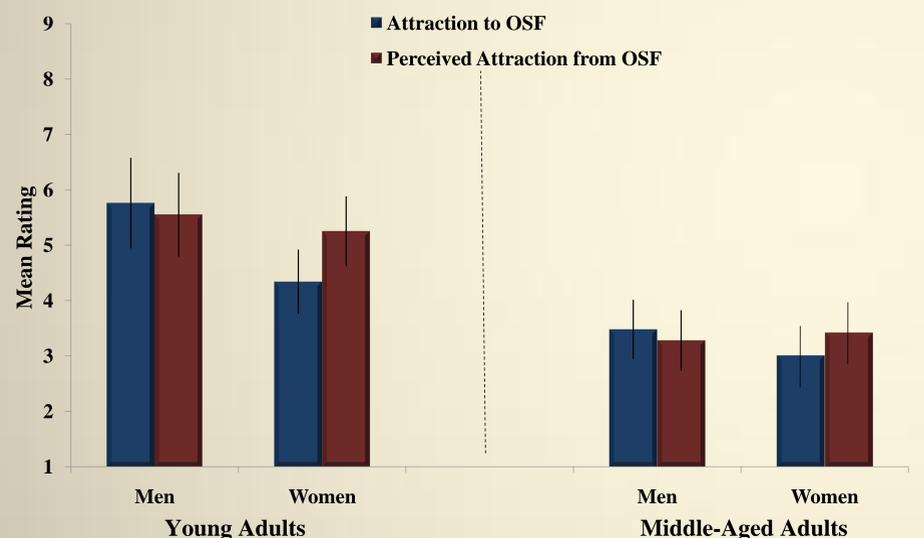


Figure 2: Participants' romantic attraction toward their opposite-sex friend and perceived attraction from their opposite-sex friend, by age group and sex.

As documented in previous samples with pairs of opposite-sex friends (Matteson, Gragg, Stocco, & Bleske-Rechek, 2006), and as displayed in Figure 2, the young adult men in this sample reported higher levels of romantic attraction toward their opposite-sex friends than did women, two-tailed  $p = .004$ . This sex difference did not replicate among middle-aged adults. As we expected, both across sex and within each sex middle-aged adults reported less attraction to their friend than did young adults.

Also as displayed in this figure, in neither age group did men's attraction to their friend differ from their estimate of their friend's level of attraction to them (paired  $t$   $ps > .30$ ). Young adult men actually estimated more attraction from their female friends than women actually reported. Women in both age groups, on the other hand, perceived more attraction from their opposite-sex friend than they felt for their opposite-sex friend (Young adult women:  $t(64) = -3.47, p = .001$ ; Middle-aged women:  $t(82) = -2.82, p = .025$ ).

	Degree of Romantic Attraction Toward Friend	Importance of Attraction for Maintaining the Friendship	Satisfaction in Current Romantic Relationship
Degree of Romantic Attraction Toward Friend	---	.70** .83**	.49* -.37*
Importance of Attraction for Maintaining the Friendship	.84** .74**	---	.15 -.38*
Satisfaction in Current Romantic Relationship	-.46** -.25*	-.39** -.31**	---

Note. All tests were two-tailed. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ . Values represent correlation coefficients. Values for the young adults are above the main diagonal, and for middle-aged adults below the main diagonal. In each cell, values for men are in the top row and values for women are in the bottom row.

Table 1: Links between attraction to friend, friendship maintenance, and current romantic relationship satisfaction.

Analyses confirmed our expectation that participants who felt more romantic attraction to their friends would rate flirtation and attraction as contributing more to the maintenance of their friendship. In fact, it was confirmed for both sexes, in both age groups (all  $rs \geq .70$ ). Further, middle-aged adult men and both young adult and middle-aged adult women who rated flirtation and attraction as contributors to the maintenance of their friendship reported less satisfaction in their current mateship. For those same groups, greater levels of romantic attraction to friend was associated with lower levels of satisfaction in their current mateship. Young adult men defied this pattern – for them, more attraction to friend was tied to *higher* levels of satisfaction in their current romantic relationship.

## Discussion

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 friendship 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 *involved* middle-aged adults' responses with *single* middle-aged adults' responses – but only 14 of our middle-aged adults were single.

Although middle-aged adults' mean level of romantic attraction 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 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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