



Friends as Rivals: Perceptions of Attractiveness

Predict Mating Rivalry in Female Friendships



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Background

Substantial research has documented that same-sex friends are similar in their sexual attitudes, social attitudes, activities, and interests and values (e.g., Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2006; Kandel, 1978). Limited research also suggests that friends might be similar in physical attractiveness (Feingold, 1988). Our first objective was to test that possibility indirectly by investigating similarity in friends' perceptions of their physical attractiveness. Second, we tested the hypothesis that women are positively biased in their perceptions of their friends' attractiveness relative to other women. Because women compete with one another primarily in the domain of attractiveness (Buss & Dedden, 1990), it is likely that having an attractive friend threatens one's own self-perceptions. Thus, our third objective was to test the prediction that when placed in direct comparison with their friend, women would show less enhancement bias about their friend's level of attractiveness. Finally, we tested the hypothesis that within a given friendship pair, the less attractive friend would perceive more mating rivalry in their friendship.

Method

Sample
Forty-six pairs of female friends participated. Their mean age was 19.5 years; the typical pair had been friends for 22 months.

Materials and Procedure
Female friends ("Friend A and Friend B") attended the session together, and were then separated for questionnaire completion. As part of a broader questionnaire about themselves and their same-sex friend, participants completed four sets of items scattered throughout.

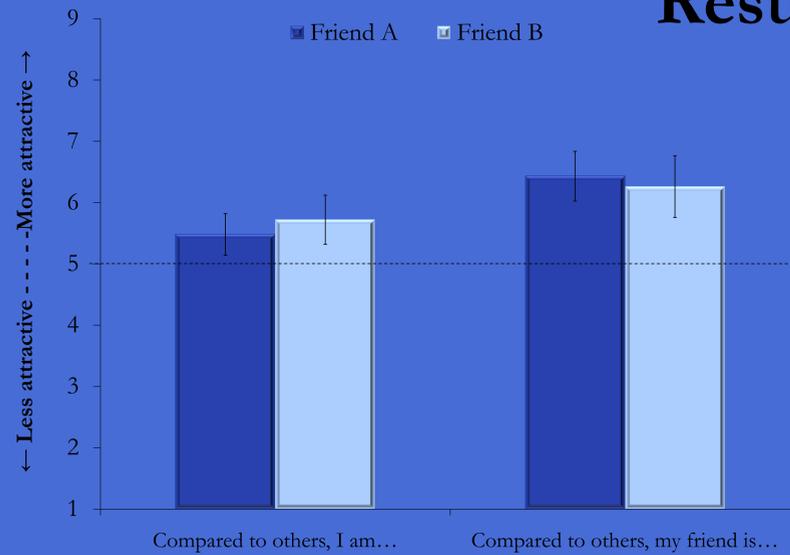
- A self-desirability assessment, which included questions such as, "Compared with other women your age, how physically attractive are you?" The nine-point scale ranged from *Much Less Attractive* to *Much More Attractive*.

- A friend desirability assessment, which included questions such as, "Compared with other women her age, how physically attractive is your friend?" The nine-point scale ranged from *Much Less Attractive* to *Much More Attractive*.

- An assessment of the participant's perception that various forms of confluence and conflict occur in the friendship. Embedded within 87 varied statements were five that assessed mating rivalry (e.g., "She flirts with guys I am interested in," and "It is harder to meet guys when she is around"). The seven-point scale ranged from *Disagree Entirely* to *Agree Entirely*.

- A direct comparison of self and friend's desirability, including the following item: "Which of the following best describes how you and your friend compare in physical attractiveness?" The seven-point scale ranged from *I Am Much More Attractive* to *She Is Much More Attractive*.

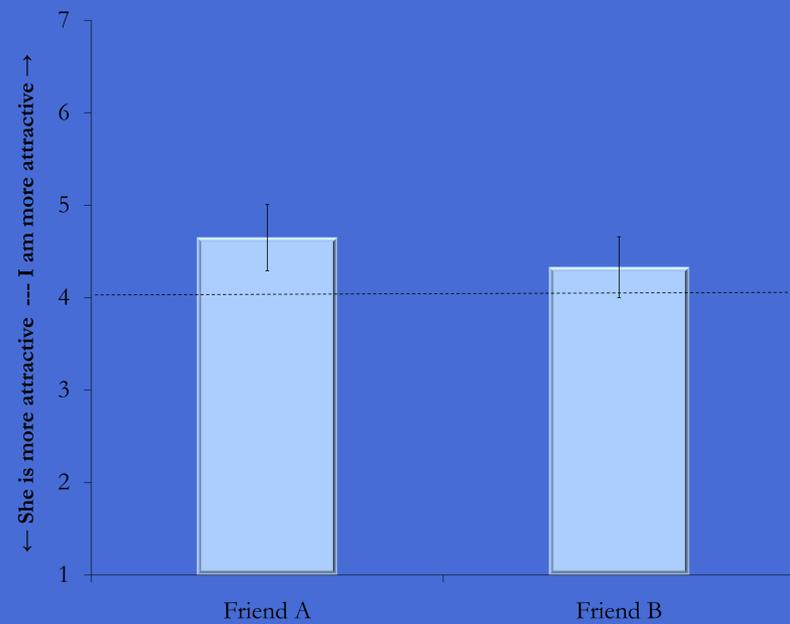
Results



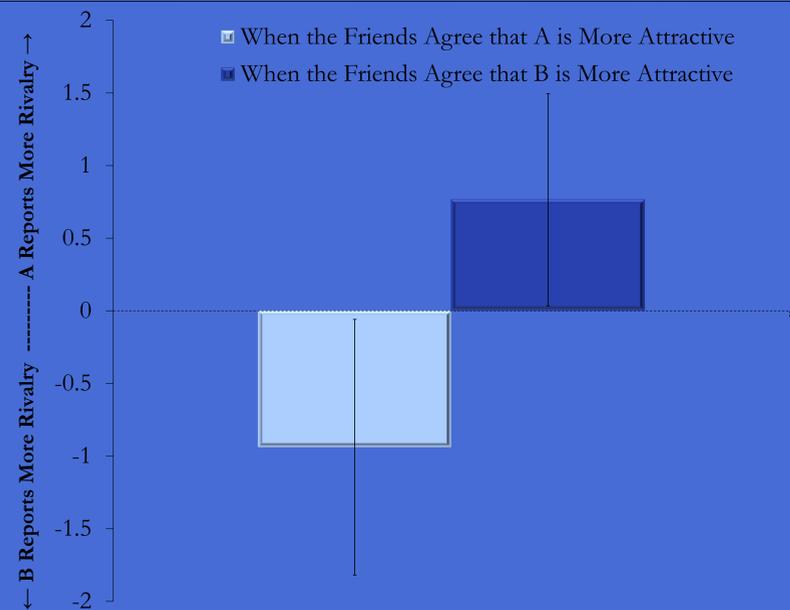
Our first hypothesis was that female friends would be similar in their level of physical attractiveness. We supported this indirectly: Female friends' self-perceived levels of attractiveness were moderately correlated, $r(46) = .30, p < .05$.

The figure at left displays the results of tests of our second hypothesis, that women would be biased about their friends' attractiveness. We tested mean ratings of self and friend against an assumed population mean of 5.0 (midpoint of the 1-9 scale). As shown in the bars on the left side of the figure, participants were biased about their own attractiveness. As shown in the bars on the right side, participants were even more biased about their friends, one-sample $t_s > 5.0, p_s < .001$.

(Note: Error bars in this figure and those to follow represent 95% CI of the mean.)



Our third hypothesis was that women would be less biased about their friends' level of attractiveness when it was placed in direct comparison with their own. To test this hypothesis, we compared women's evaluation of their friends (relative to themselves) against a population mean of 4 (midpoint of the 1-7 scale, represented by "We're the same"). As displayed in the figure to the left, the hypothesis was partially supported. Friend As' ratings showed a continued bias, with ratings of friend versus self well above the midpoint of the scale ($M = 4.65$; one-sample $t(45) = 3.64, p < .001$). However, in support of the hypothesis, Friend Bs' ratings of friend versus self no longer held a bias toward friend ($M = 4.33$; one-sample $t(45) = 1.98, p > .05$). Thus, although these women perceived their friends as above average compared to other women (as noted in Hypothesis 2), they did not perceive their friends as more attractive than themselves.



Our final hypothesis was that within friendship pairs, the less attractive friend would perceive more rivalry in the friendship. To test this hypothesis, we first recoded participants' responses to indicate whether they perceived their friend as more attractive, or themselves as equally or more attractive than their friend. Then we looked at the 30 of 45 cases in which the two friends agreed about which friend was more attractive. As shown in the figure to the left, in the 13 cases in which the friends agreed that Friend A was more attractive, Friend B reported more mating rivalry in the friendship (Friend A minus Friend B rivalry $M = -.94, SD = 1.60$, one-sample t against a presumed population mean of zero = 2.11, $p = .028$). In the 17 cases in which the friends agreed that Friend B was more attractive, Friend A reported more mating rivalry in the friendship (Friend A minus Friend B rivalry $M = .76, SD = 1.51$, one-sample $t = 2.09, p = .027$).

Discussion

In this study, we documented for the first time that women friends are similar in self-perceived attractiveness. Past research has documented that women friends have similar attitudes about sexual relationships (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2006), and in light of the links between physical attractiveness and mating, it seems appropriate that women would also have similar views about their level of attractiveness. It is important to note that because we did not obtain outsider ratings of our friends' attractiveness levels, we cannot conclude that friends' attractiveness levels are, in fact, similar. Our next step in this research is to investigate similarity in friends' attractiveness levels using ratings from outside judges.

We also found that women who perceive themselves as less attractive than their friend experience more mating rivalry in their friendship. Together, our findings suggests that although women friends may be similar in attractiveness, one friend can still be more attractive than the other – and friendship dynamics may be tied to that comparison. In previous studies, young adult men and women reported experiencing mating rivalry in their friendships, and they also perceived that rivalry as costly. Is the cost of rivalry that might go along with having a more attractive friend outweighed by its benefits (such as attracting desirable men)? Again, one step to unraveling the links between rivalry and attractiveness in friendship will involve outsider ratings. We expect that for a given friendship pair, the woman who judges perceive as less attractive will be more likely than the other to report experiencing mating rivalry in their friendship.

References

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Acknowledgments

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