



The Good and Bad of Friendship:

Perceptions Vary by Age, Sex, and Friendship Type

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Background

Given the changes that many people undergo during the third decade of life, including a move to long-term partnerships, full-time employment, and raising children, it is likely that the nature of their friendships changes during that time. However, only a handful of studies (e.g., Pahl & Pevalin, 2005) have investigated men's and women's friendships as a function of age and life stage. In the current study, we investigated adults' perceptions of the good and bad of friendship, as a function of their age group (young adult or middle-age), sex (male or female), and type of friendship (same-sex or opposite-sex). On the basis of past research on human mating and friendship (e.g., Bleske & Shackelford, 2001; Fehr, 1996; Werking, 1997) we hypothesized that

- (1) Men would nominate sexual attraction as a benefit of their opposite-sex friendships more frequently than women would, particularly in young adulthood;
- (2) Women would nominate sexual attraction as a cost of their opposite-sex friendships more frequently than men would;
- (3) Participants would nominate mating rivalry as a cost of their same-sex friendships more than of their opposite-sex friendships, particularly in young adulthood;
- (4) Participants would nominate jealousy as a cost of their opposite-sex friendships more than of their same-sex friendships.

Method

Participants

A total of 249 adults participated in this study. 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. 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).

Materials

As part of a broader questionnaire on friendship networks in adulthood, participants responded to several open-ended items about the ways in which their friendships enhanced their lives (or were beneficial to them) and complicated their lives (or were costly to them). On up to ten blank lines, participants nominated the most beneficial and then the most costly aspects of their current and recent same-sex friendships; then they did the same for their opposite-sex friendships. Half of the participants completed the tasks in reverse order. Participants also reported current demographic information such as their age, relationship status, and relationship satisfaction.

Category and Sample Nomination	% Nominating
Benefits	
Conversation/ Communication/ Advice "Someone to talk to"	54
Support: Work, Emotional, Spiritual, Physical, Financial "I can fall back on them for help"	46
Companionship/ Share Activities/ Outlet "It's nice to have someone to 'pal-around' with"	38
Relatable/ Understanding "Easy to relate and talk to"	36
Costs	
Time/ Availability/ Distance "Takes time away from my family"	28
Emotionally Draining/ Stressful "They can cause a lot of drama and stress"	22
Negative Outcomes/ Risk "Hard feelings led to the loss of a friendship"	20
Mating Rivalry/ Competition "We may like the same guy"	18

Tables 1 and 2. Across sex and age group, the most frequently nominated benefits and costs of

Same-Sex Friendship

Opposite-Sex Friendship

Category and Sample Nomination	% Nominating
Benefits	
Understanding of/ Perspectives on Opposite-Sex "Insight into the mind of the opposite sex"	48
Conversation/ Communication/ Advice "Someone to talk to"	37
Support: Work, Emotional, Spiritual, Physical, Financial "I can fall back on them for help"	25
Companionship/ Share Activities/ Outlet "It's nice to have someone to 'pal-around' with"	24
Costs	
Mating Desires/ Sexual Tension/ Flirtation/ Love/ Romance "Can lead to romantic feelings"	32
Interferes with Romantic Partner/ Jealousy "My romantic partner gets jealous of our friendship"	21
Dissimilar Perspectives/ Interests/ Life Stages/ Can't Relate "We're at different places in our lives"	18
Emotionally Draining/ Stressful "They can cause a lot of drama and stress"	18

Results and Discussion

The typical participant listed 4 benefits and 2 costs of same-sex friendship, and 3 benefits and 1 cost of opposite-sex friendship. We coded each benefit nomination into one of 19 distinct categories, and each cost nomination into one of 20 distinct categories. Tables 1 and 2 display the categories most frequently nominated.

Our first and second hypotheses, that men more than women would nominate sexual attraction/desire as a benefit of their opposite-sex friendships, and that women more than men would nominate it as a cost, were supported (see Figure 1). In fact, overall, *mating desires* was the most frequently nominated cost of opposite-sex friendships. Although only a small percentage of participants nominated *mating desires* as a benefit of their opposite-sex friendships, in each age group that percentage was higher for men than for women. The numbers may seem low, but given that these were participants' spontaneous nominations and not selections from a pre-set list, the numbers may actually represent a conservative estimate of the perceived benefit of sexual attraction in friendship.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 were also supported. As displayed in Tables 1 and 2, participants overall held similar perceptions of the top benefits of friendship. However, the most frequently cited costs of same-sex and opposite-sex friendship were quite different: whereas mating rivalry or competition was a frequently mentioned cost of *same-sex* friendship, jealousy from a romantic partner was a frequently mentioned cost of *opposite-sex* friendship (see Figure 2). Perhaps people's awareness of how mating desires have operated in their own friendships leads them to be wary of their own partner's involvement in an opposite-sex friendship.

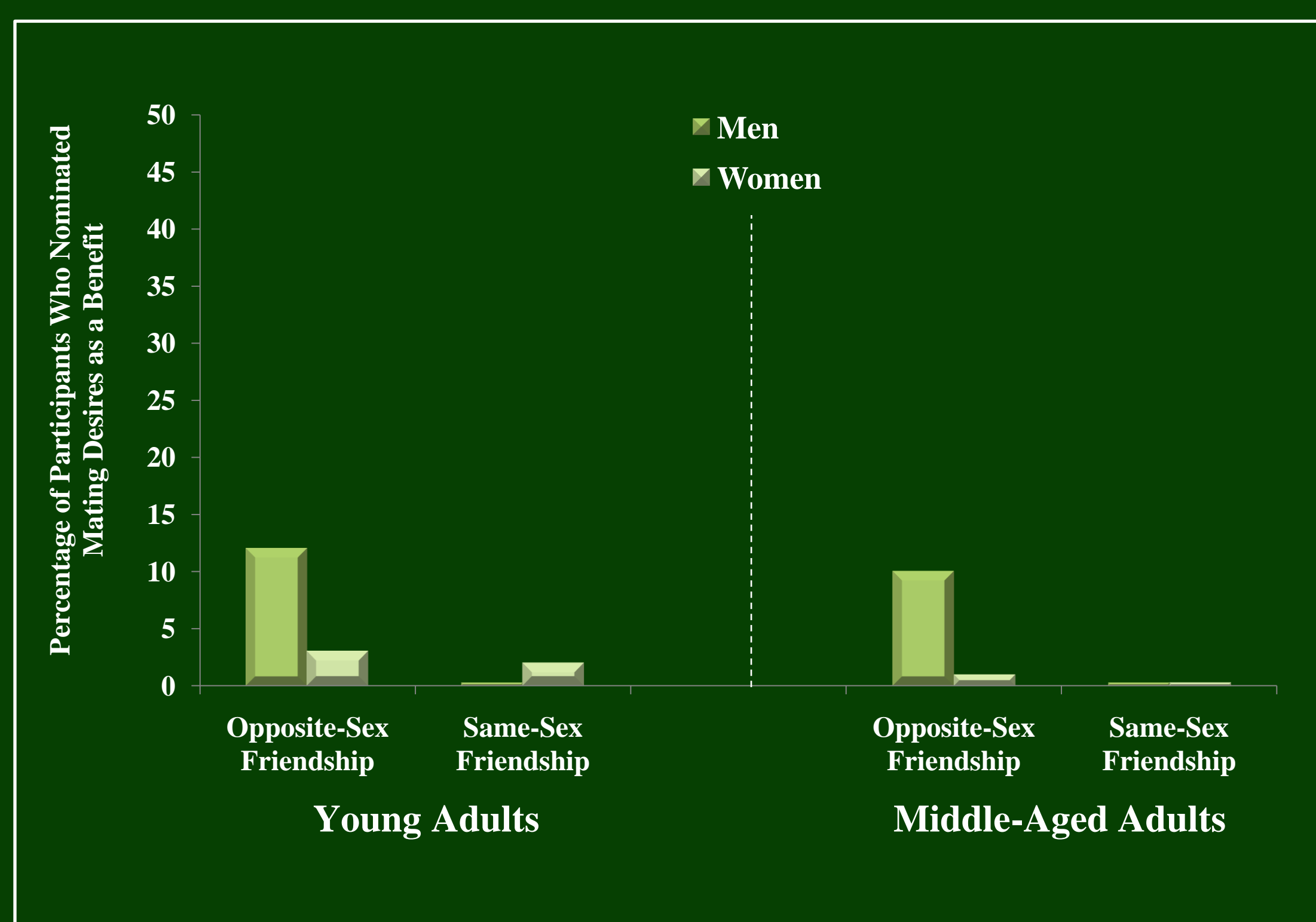


Figure 1.

Display of the percentage of men and women in each age group who spontaneously nominated mating desires as a *benefit* of their friendships (left) and as a *cost* of their friendships (right). As displayed at left, in each age group, only a minority of participants nominated mating desires (e.g., "I am sexually attracted to them") as a benefit of their opposite-sex friendships. However, in each age group more men than women nominated mating desires as a benefit. As displayed at right, participants frequently nominated mating desires as a cost of their opposite-sex friendships, and women did so more than did men.

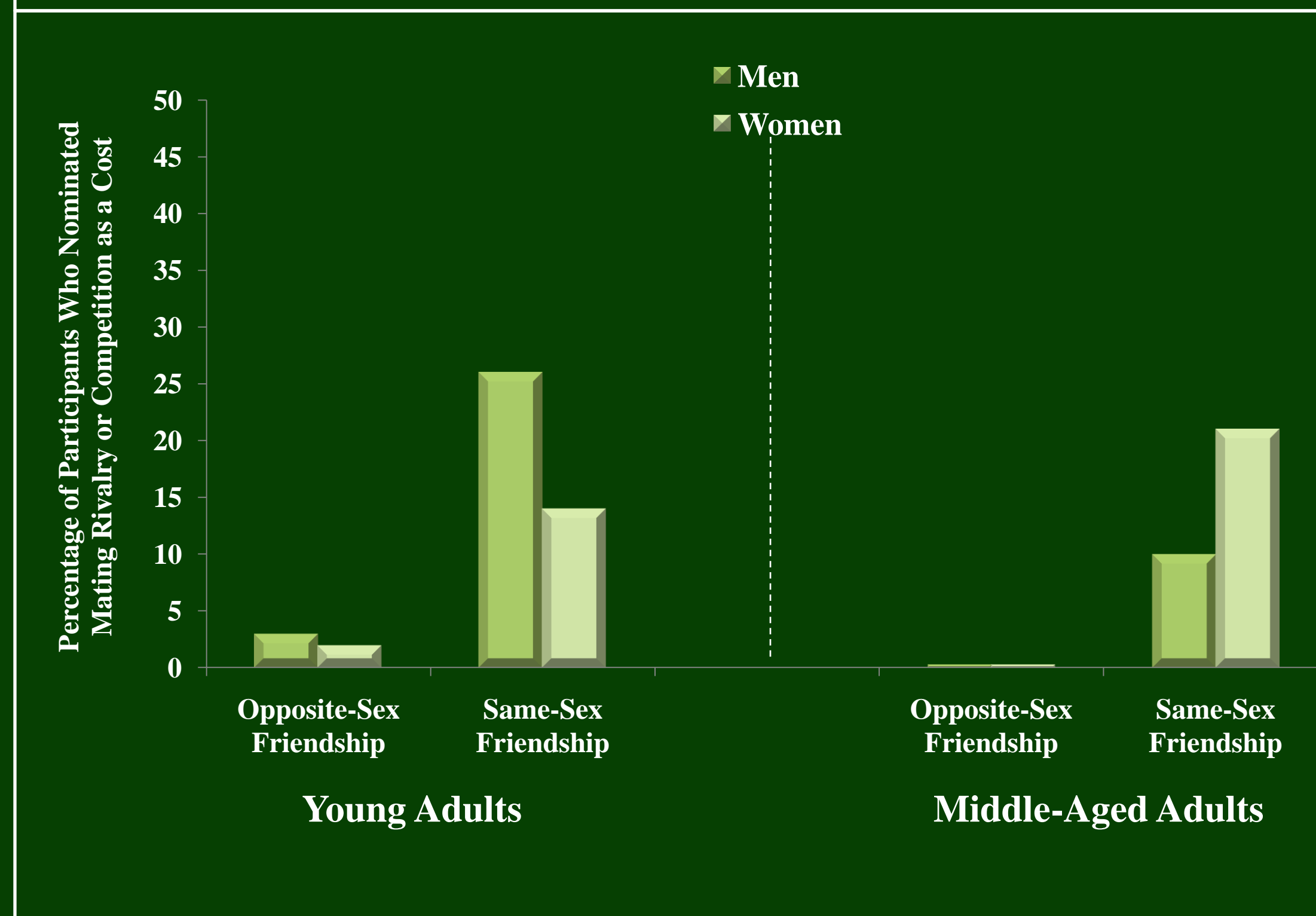


Figure 2.

Display of the percentage of men and women in each age group who spontaneously mentioned *mating rivalry and competition* as a cost of their friendships (left) and *jealousy* from a romantic partner as a cost of their friendships (right). As displayed at left, in both age groups about 20% of participants mentioned that rivalry and competition complicated their same-sex friendships. As displayed at right, participants mentioned jealousy from romantic partners as a cost of their opposite-sex friendships more than of their same-sex friendships – particularly in middle-age.

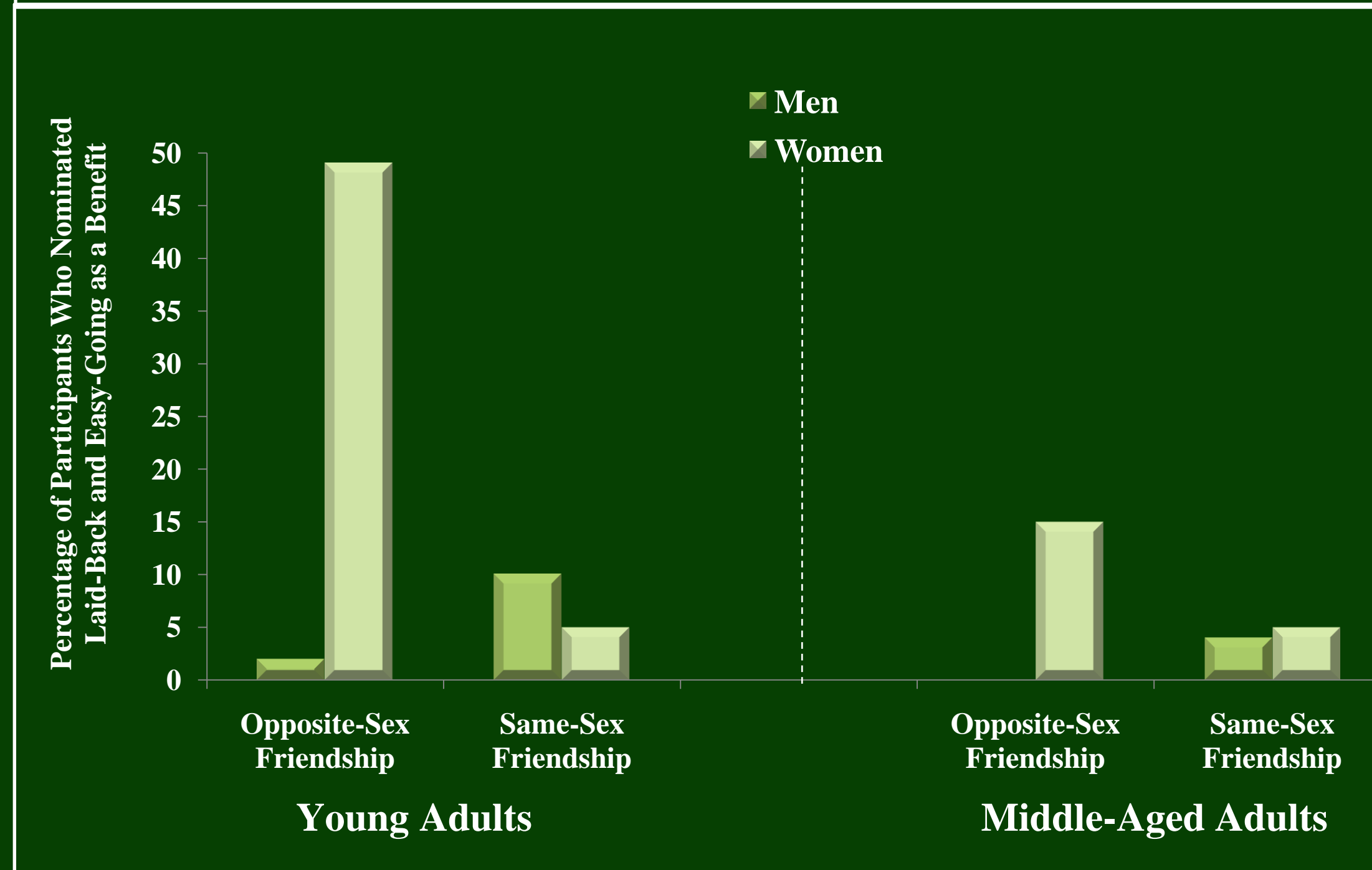


Figure 3.

Display of the percentage of men and women in each age group who spontaneously nominated the easy-going nature of the relationship as a *benefit* of their friendships (left) and the emotional drain and stress of the relationship as a *cost* of their friendships (right). As displayed at left, in both age groups women were more likely than men to mention that their friendships with the other sex were laid back; but as displayed at right, in both age groups men were more likely than women to mention that their friendships with the other sex were emotionally draining or stressful.

Select References

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Acknowledgments

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