

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Intrasexual female competition and female trust in gay male sales associates' recommendations

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Abstract

These studies draw on evolutionary psychology and intrasexual female competition to examine why female shoppers often prefer working with gay male (GM) sales associates over heterosexual female (HF) sales associates. Study 1 finds that female shoppers often attribute trustworthiness to GM sales associates. Study 2 draws on theories of intrasexual competition and shows that female shoppers are more likely to trust product recommendations from a GM sales associate than an HF sales associate when they feel a sense of competitiveness with the female associate. Study 3 reveals that female shoppers' trust in GM sales associates is limited to situations in which they are intending to purchase products that are meant to enhance their physical appearance. Study 4 extends these findings by showing that women are more likely to trust GM sales associates (vs. HF sales associates) when the objective of their purchase is to attract a desirable mate. The findings suggest that retailers should hire a diverse workforce and consider the role of e-commerce in helping some female shoppers avoid potentially uncomfortable situations.

KEYWORDS

evolutionary psychology, gay employees, gay-straight relationships, intrasexual female competition, retailing, social influence

1 | INTRODUCTION

Popular culture and television often depict the presence of gay men in the fashion industry and as sales associates in retail settings. Indeed, recent retailing investigations reveal that gay male (GM) sales associates tend to work well with female customers, particularly in high-end retail or service establishments, such as boutiques and hair salons (Lawson, 1999; Rosenbaum, Russell-Bennett, & Drennan, 2015). Research further suggests that female shoppers show a preference for working with GM sales associates over female sales associates when they believe they are less attractive or are considerably older than the female sales associates (Rosenbaum, Russell, & Russell-Bennett, 2017). These findings imply that in certain consumption situations, female customers may put more credibility in the advice from GM sales associates—most notably when they

require assistance with merchandise selections and are uncomfortable working with more physically attractive or younger female associates (Peretz, 1995).

Although research showing positive interactions between GM sales associates and female customers in some retail contexts contributes to the well-established relationship marketing paradigm (Gummesson, 2002), the field lacks a clear theoretical understanding of why these relationships transpire in some retailing locales. Evolutionary theory may help shed some light on the causes and contexts that influence female shoppers to prefer working with GM sales associates over their female counterparts in some retail settings. Emerging research suggests that human friendships, the way human beings build and maintain alliances with others, and the extent to which they enhance personal happiness through social interactions with others are all innately driven (Lewis, Al-Shawaf, Russell, & Buss, 2015).

Evolutionary theory on female intrasexual competition suggests that women are innately driven to perceive highly attractive and feminine women as competition in their efforts to attract or retain a male mate (Buss, 1988; Fink, Klappauf, Brewer, & Shackelford, 2014). As a result, women often perceive mating advice from gay men as more trustworthy than that from either heterosexual men or women (Russell, DelPriore, Butterfield, & Hill, 2013; Russell, Ta, Lewis, Babcock, & Ickes, 2017). Intrasexual competition in service-intensive retail environments may encourage some female shoppers to refrain from obtaining, to discount, or to reject advice from female sales associates, particularly when they are considering purchasing specific merchandise to attract or retain a heterosexual man (Prendergast, Li, & Li, 2014).

This investigation draws on evolutionary models of intrasexual competition to understand why female shoppers often demonstrate a preference for GM sales associates in retail settings. The article consists of four studies. Study 1 provides descriptive insights into how heterosexual female (HF) shoppers discern GM sales associates in retail settings and uncovers their feelings of comfort and trustworthiness toward working with them.

Study 2 expands on the first study by exploring the extent to which intra-female competition, in consumption settings, encourages HF shoppers to view advice from GM sales associates as more trustworthy compared to the same advice provided by HF sales associates. Study 3 builds upon the second study by showing that HF shoppers' preference for a GM sales associate manifests when selecting merchandise meant to enhance their physical appearance.

Last, Study 4 builds upon the previous by clarifying the types of consumption situations and interpersonal characteristics that encourage women to seek the advice of GM sales associates. That is, this study reveals that women perceive more positive intent from and are more likely to trust GM sales associates (vs. HF sales associates) when purchasing apparel to attract or to retain a romantic partner in contrast to attending a family (i.e., nonromantic) event. Overall, by drawing on the tenets of evolution theory, these four studies provide academics and practitioners with a clearer understanding regarding the contexts and conditions that foster "commercial friendships" between GM sales associates and their HF customers.

2 | BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Because men put high importance on physical attractiveness in their mates (Smith, Waldorf, & Trembath, 1990), mating competition among women tends to occur in the domain of physical attractiveness. Women tend to fixate on potential female rivals who possess physical qualities desired by men, such as facial attractiveness and an ideal waist-to-hip ratio (Fink et al., 2014). When women are in the presence of more attractive same-sex others (Massar & Buunk, 2010), they may feel competitiveness, distress (Buss, Shackelford, Choe, Buunk, & Dijkstra, 2000), and jealousy. Although evolutionary theorists generally focus on intrasexual competition as it pertains to

direct competition for romantic partners (Fisher & Cox, 2011), research suggests that intrasexual rivalry stemming from physical attractiveness can spill over into other life domains. For example, women are harsher on attractive (vs. unattractive) female offenders (Phillips & Hranek, 2012) and are less likely to hire more attractive women (Luxen & Van De Vijver, 2006). This research suggests that women's social interactions with other women are often laden with underlying competitive rivalry, leading women to often distrust same-sex others (Fisher, 2017).

Given that women's interactions with attractive same-sex others are often characterized by an underlying thread of competitiveness, how might this affect women's interactions with female sales associates? Research examining this topic has found that female consumers often feel uncomfortable interacting with some female sales associates in retail settings (Wan & Wyer, 2015). For example, research shows that female cosmetic shoppers, in Hong Kong, express a stronger purchase intention when working with male sales associates over their female counterparts because they believe that male sales associates will value their opinions and work harder than female sales associates to enhance their facial appearance (Prendergast et al., 2014). That research suggests that in a cosmetic selling context, female customers may perceive a male sales associate's advice as being more credible than a female counterpart because from a "Darwinian view of reproduction" males are better attuned than females to provide useful judgments about female beauty (Prendergast et al., 2014).

Extant research supports the idea that women may feel most comfortable with GM sales associates when purchasing certain product classifications, including cosmetics, accessories, apparel, and shoes. Rosenbaum et al. (2017) show that women prefer working with GM sales associates over female sales associates whom they perceive as being more attractive than themselves when they need assistance with purchasing apparel and accessories; however, this preference diminishes for assistance with other products, such as housewares.

While this retailing research is insightful, research chasms still exist in the understanding of the GM sales associate–HF shopper relationship. First, although research shows that heterosexual women may prefer working with GM sales associates in certain situations (Peretz, 1995) or for specific products, such as apparel and accessories (Rosenbaum et al., 2017), how do female shoppers identify GM associates in retail settings? That is, to date, marketing researchers exploring commercial friendships and relationships between heterosexual women and GM sales associates have failed to discern how these relationships often begin or how female customers discern GM associates on a retail sales floor.

Although psychological studies in experimental settings show that women discern gay men from available facial, verbal, and nonverbal behavioral cues (Tabak & Zayas, 2012; Valentova & Havlíček, 2013), knowledge of how this transpires in retail settings is somewhat lacking. Peretz (1995) discussed how GM sales associates working in a Paris-based boutique may be discernable because they tend to wear cosmetics or to accessorize with feminine scarves.

Along these lines, Lawson (1999) noted how female beauty salon customers often discern gay men by the way they walk. Thus, a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of how heterosexual women discern GM sales associates in retail and service settings instead of laboratory settings is well warranted. Second, research lacks an understanding of the causal conditions and consequences that support working relationships between GM sales associates and their HF customers in retail settings.

3 | STUDY 1

Study 1 achieves three objectives. First, although descriptive studies allude to how women attempt to deduce a male sales associate's sexual orientation by analyzing physical characteristics, voice tone, or clothing in retail settings (Lawson, 1999; Peretz, 1995), no study, to date, has explored this phenomenon in depth. Given that prior research suggests that judgments of sexual orientation can derive from relatively limited cues, Study 1 aims to uncover the precise signals that enable heterosexual women to guess a male sales associate's homosexuality, thus, buttressing the existence of "markers of queer identities" (Clarke & Turner, 2007, p.271), albeit, in retail settings.

Second, the humanistic data reveal specific attributes that female customers assign to GM sales associates. On the one hand, many of these attributes, such as honesty, friendliness, and helpfulness, represent the bedrock of friendships and thus provide GM sales associates with a foundation to build meaningful "commercial friendships" (Garzaniti, Pearce, & Stanton, 2011; Price & Arnould, 1999) with their female customers. On the other, some of the attributes, such as feminine and flamboyant, represent two common subgroup stereotypes into which gay men are often classified into by heterosexuals (McCutecheon & Morrison, 2019), suggesting that certain stereotypes about gay men remain pervasive in society.

Research shows that customer comfort positively affects the success of service delivery as people disclose more information about themselves when they feel comfortable, and a high level of comfort helps customers reduce anxiety and realize enhanced self-esteem during service encounters (Spake, Beatty, Brockman, & Crutchfield, 2003). Although retailing researchers have conceptually proposed that female shoppers may sense empathy, trust, and comfort when working with GM sales associates (Rosenbaum et al., 2015), there is little empirical or humanistic research examining this in retail and service contexts. As such, the third objective of this study is to explicate the attributes that female shoppers assign to GM associates and examine how these attributes influence their sense of comfort and trust in working with them.

3.1 | Sample and procedures

The data for this study came from female informants who were present in a shopping district located in a large metropolitan

Australian city that has a large gay population. The shopping district is an open-air, upscale lifestyle center, and contains several high-end retailers and luxury boutiques (e.g., Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Gucci) and popular eateries. Interviews were conducted with a mall-intercept, convenience sample (Bush & Hair, 1985) of 23 self-identified heterosexual women who recalled interacting with at least one presumably GM sales associate in a retail setting within the past 90 days. Informants ranged in age from 19 to 56 years (Table 1). Note that the informants' recall of working with a GM sales associate was not corroborated further.

This study required the collection of information, that is, not normally available or regularly discussed and that may be greatly influenced by political and societal sensitivities, which were heightened in the sample site from the pending gay marriage legislation in the country. Given these environmental conditions, two of the authors trained a female graduate student on how to conduct semi-structured interviews with female consumers. This data collection strategy has two advantages. First, informants may feel more comfortable speaking truthfully to a younger female graduate student than with university-affiliated, older researchers, who may trigger a social desirability bias. Second, because the graduate student identified herself as a heterosexual woman who regularly shops in the community, insider knowledge facilitates expressions of shared experiences, yielding rich, descriptive insights.

TABLE 1 Demographic profile

Age	Country of birth	Ethnicity	Citizenship
19	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
20	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
20	UK	Caucasian	Britain
20	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
20	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
20	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
20	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
21	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
21	Australia	Ingenious/Black	Australia
22	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
22	Australia	Asian	Australia
23	New Zealand	Caucasian	New Zealand
24	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
27	Australia	Caucasian	Australian
33	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
39	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
41	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
42	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
44	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
46	Australia	Caucasian	Australia
55	England	Caucasian	Australia/UK
56	Scotland	Caucasian	New Zealand
56	Australia	Caucasian	Australia

The interviews followed McCracken's (1988, p.34) procedures for conducting long interviews. The interview questions were sufficiently broad enough to allow the informants to "tell their own story in their terms." To probe the study's two research objectives, prompts were also used when necessary to guide the interview. The informants were asked to recall one of their experiences with an apparent or confirmed GM sales associate. Informants were then asked to discuss how they discerned that the sales associate was gay and to describe the sales associate in their own words. Last, each informant was asked to discuss how the sales associate made her feel during that service experience.

First, the interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed into documents for exporting into NVivo 11 software. Second, the data were coded by means of Strauss and Corbin (1990) axial coding method, which builds a causal-consequential pathway around a phenomenon of interest. In this study, the main interest was understanding the drives that encourage positive working relationships between GM sales associates and HF customers. The causal conditions were the attributes of GM associates that female customers expressed, and the consequences were sensations related to how they felt during and after the service experience. The action strategies that constitute axial coding were the tactics women employ to discern a male sales associate's sexual orientation in a retail setting.

Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework. This framework illustrates the causes, consequences, and actions surrounding the relationship between GM sales associates and HF customers in retail settings. The following subsections delineate the frameworks' conceptual categories.

3.2 | Attributes related to GM sales associates

3.2.1 | Honesty

The data reveal that 15 (65%) of the 23 female informants noted that they attributed feelings of honesty to GM sales associates. A theme that arose in many of the interviews is that a GM sales associate is more likely than either a female or a heterosexual male sales associate to "tell it like it is." Other informants noted the word "genuine," when discussing their perceptions of gay sales associates. A 23-year-old informant highlighted the honesty and genuineness that nearly two-thirds of the informants also attributed to gay sales associates as follows: "He was honest. There was one piece that I selected, and he said, "um, no." He could understand my insecurities and what I wanted to get out of a dress. He gave his honest opinion, which I appreciated."

3.2.2 | Feminine

Eight (35%) informants used the term "feminine" to describe their GM sales associates. A 39-year-old informant noted that her gay sales associate was wearing makeup; thus, she perceived him as being "a feminine male sort of thing" (a "thing" being a new gender classification); however, she then remarked that "the thing" was "a lovely person, just yeah, he was gay." The feminization of the gay sales associate is not necessarily a hostile response, but rather an endearing response that allows a sense of comfort to ensue between the gay associate and his female client. The same customer later

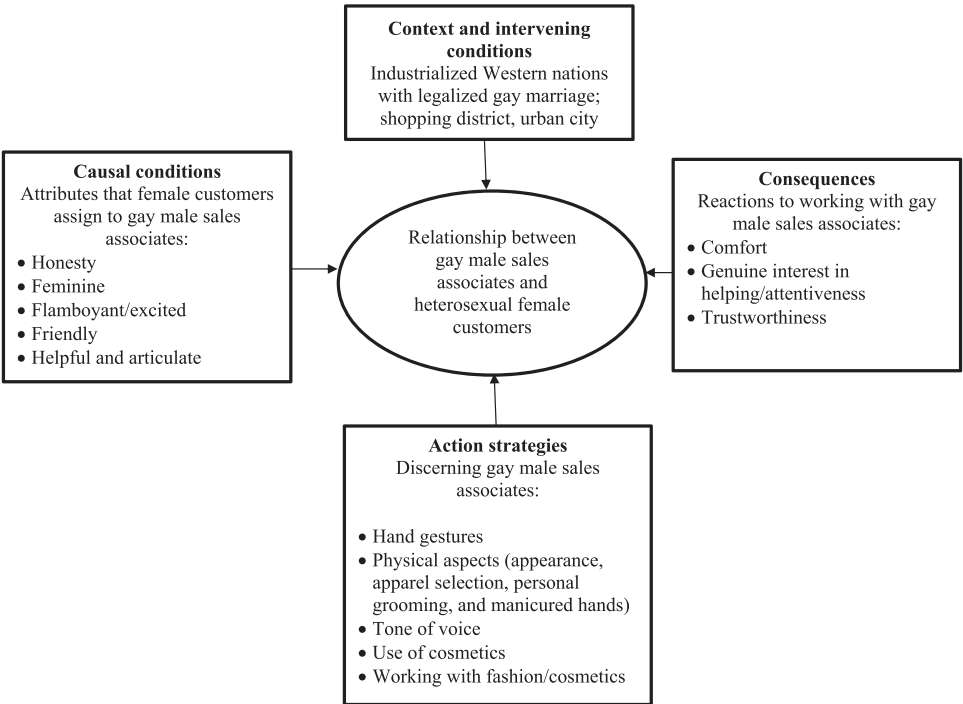


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework: gay male sales associates and heterosexual female customer relationships in retail settings

noted, "I was very secure and comfortable, and I did trust him." The classification of gay men into a unique gender category, separate from their heterosexual counterparts, seems to encourage female customers to feel comfort and trust when working with gay sales associates.

3.2.3 | Flamboyant

Five (22%) informants described their GM sales associate as flamboyant, and four (17%) used the term "excited" to describe their sales associate. Although "flamboyant" maybe have a negative connotation, GM flamboyancy, and excitedness again seem to trigger a sensation in female customers that separates gay men from heterosexual men in a positive manner. A 20-year-old female described her gay sales associate as follows: "He was very flamboyant, very over the top, and his knowledge in fashion at times exceeded my own. I would expect a heterosexual male to act a lot more subdued." The same informant later noted, "I definitely trusted his advice and felt very comfortable in what he was choosing." Thus, by acting in a manner that is opposite that of a heterosexual man, the GM sales associate is able to engender trust, comfort, and credibility when working with female customers.

The display of ebullience seems to set the gay man apart from his heterosexual counterpart. A 55-year-old informant noted that her gay sales associate was excited about her dress: "I'd expect a gay male to be excited about fashion and not a [heterosexual] male, who would not be excited." Again, when heterosexual women are able to surmise that a male sales associate is homosexual, a sense of trust between them and the employee emerges. Indeed, the same client remarked, "Yeah, I think he was definitely more interested in what I was purchasing rather than um ... just taking your money, which is good." Thus, female clients tend to perceive gay sales associates who display "zing" on the sales floor as trustworthy.

3.2.4 | Friendly

Three (13%) informants described their GM associate as being friendly, and two (9%) used the term "chatty" to describe their associate. Friendliness seems to evoke feelings of service quality in female customers, which helps the gay associate "close the sale." A 44-year-old woman purchasing cosmetics noted, "The experience was great, so the person [gay associate] was very knowledgeable about the products; very friendly; knew what he was talking about." The sales associate's friendly demeanor served to assure the customer, as she said, "I just found it would be odd because I wasn't expecting a male to be behind that counter."

Another informant described her gay sales associate at a cosmetic counter as "chatty." The informant remarked that the sales associate "was asking me about what fake tan I use, telling me that his sister gets that fake tan in Australia rah, rah." Yet this banter

seems to be a win-win for the sales associate, as the customer said, "So the guy made me feel really ... important. Like it wasn't busy but often in those kinds of environments, you feel a bit pushed around like they don't really care about you but no he ... genuinely wanted to make me look nice." Thus, women may perceive the talkative gay man as an indication of his nonsexual, genuine interest.

3.2.5 | Helpful

Two informants described their gay sales associate as "helpful," and two other informants used the term "articulate." A 22-year-old woman remarked that her sales associate "was incredibly helpful." She went on to say, "I could tell that he was very sales motivated but I was very, very comfortable with him. I thought ... he knew the product very well actually." Thus, responsiveness yields feelings of comfort and, ultimately, sales.

Two women described their sales associates as being articulate in terms of physical demeanor or vocabulary. These informants noted that heterosexual men lack the same articulation as gay men. A 41-year-old informant stated, "He sort of spoke quite articulately and that doesn't always obviously mean it [that he is gay] ...but it's just different than what I would expect from a heterosexual male." This difference seems to serve both the GM sales associate and the customer, as she further said, "I definitely didn't think he was sales motivated or pushy. I actually found him quite comfortable to deal with, he was very down to earth and very ... informative and I kind of trusted his judgment a lot on the types of things he was showing me."

3.3 | Discerning GM sales associates

3.3.1 | Gestures

When asked how they recognize or discern GM sales associates, 13 (57%) of the 23 informants noted that they judge the way these men gesture with their hands. A 56-year-old informant discussed how she honed in on hand gestures to guess homosexuality: "Oh, the way he moved his hands and the way he stood and the way he laughed and um ... yes he was definitely gay. He wasn't trying to hide it either and he wasn't trying to flaunt it, he just was [himself]."

3.3.2 | Physical

Eleven (48%) informants noted that they appraise a male sales associate's physical appearance, apparel selection, and personal grooming to judge his homosexuality. Another 56-year-old informant said, "His appearance was very neat ... yeah very well dressed, very neat. Not in the manner of a heterosexual male." Similarly, a 39-year-old woman noted how she discerned that her sales associate was gay: "He was quite slim, very neatly dressed, very short sort of manicured hair and very clean." Thus, qualities such as being neatly dressed,

tidy, manicured, and clean seem to be identifying characteristics that help women feel at ease with GM sales associates.

3.3.3 | Voice

Eight (35%) informants noted that they determine a male sales associate's sexual orientation from listening to his tone of voice. A 21-year-old informant noted that she uses several signals to determine an associate's homosexuality: "I don't know how to explain this ... but you know how they [gay men] talk sort of like in a higher pitch and it's ... like just his voice in general and just like the manner in which he was like talking. It was like the language he was using and the tone but also physical characteristics."

3.3.4 | Cosmetics

Four (17%) informants deduced their male sales associate's homosexuality from his use of cosmetics. A 20-year-old woman discussed how she noted hand gestures, voice, and the presence of cosmetics to surmise her male sales associate's homosexuality: "Because of his hand mannerisms, his voice; he was wearing makeup himself, not over-the-top makeup, but you could see that he had foundation on and obviously a bit of blush and some kind of lipstick." Similarly, another 20-year-old informant paid attention to body language, appearance, voice, and makeup to guess a male sales associate sexual orientation; she said, "[I] suppose just general body language; how he looked; he already had makeup on."

3.3.5 | Working with fashion/cosmetics

Two (9%) informants judged the male sales associate's knowledge about fashion as an indicator of his possible homosexuality, while one (4%) informant surmised that a male sales associate working in a department store's cosmetic department was gay. A 23-year-old woman discussed how she used several signals to determine a male sales associate's sexual orientation: "I guess his over-the-top sort of arm gestures, [his] higher pitch voice, you know, you don't really get that with heterosexual guys ... and just his knowledge of fashion." Similarly, a 20-year-old informant said, "It's hard to really pick how someone is gay but as much as a stereotype as it was ... he was very, very stylishly dressed and he was very flamboyant, very over the top, and his knowledge in fashion at times exceeded my own. So, obviously he didn't say he was gay, but there were hints, and it was sort of clear."

A 20-year-old informant also remarked that she determined her male sales associate's homosexuality by his employment in a cosmetic department. However, she also used other signals to guess the associate's homosexuality; she said, "First of all, the fact that he was a male working in a cosmetics section of a department store kind [of] fits the stereotype [of being gay]. Second, just his demeanor; his

confidence, the way he walked; the way he presented himself; his dress, his tone of voice even, it just fit the fact that he was a gay person pretty much."

3.3.6 | Conclusion

On the one hand, the findings suggest that heterosexual women discern GM sales associates primarily by looking for attributes that are part and parcel of existing gay stereotypes, which often result in gay men being viewed by others as less masculine than heterosexual men (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009). On the other hand, this study provides a first attempt in the retailing domain to thoroughly classify characteristics that heterosexual women use to discern, whether correctly or incorrectly, GM sale associates in retail contexts, thereby buttressing key works in the relationship marketing paradigm (Peretz, 1995; Rosenbaum et al., 2015, 2017).

3.4 | Reactions

3.4.1 | Comfort

Fourteen (61%) of the 23 informants used the term "comfortable" to describe how they felt when working with a presumably GM associate. Several informants discussed that they felt more comfortable working with gay sales associates, especially if they felt stigmatized by working with a younger or more attractive female associate. A 24-year-old informant said, "If I'm trying on clothing, it makes me feel insecure [if] it looks better on the female sales associate, it's that sort of thing.... Gay men are easier to work with." The results suggest that when HF customers feel intimidated, they will purposefully seek out GM sales associates, who seem to be more honest with them and, perhaps, more empathetic to understanding the personal complexities and insecurities that many women have regarding their physical appearance.

3.4.2 | Interest

Six (26%) informants remarked that they believed that their GM sales associate was genuinely interested in helping them or were attentive. A 39-year-old woman noted her sense of comfort with working with a gay sales associate, saying, "I would return to the store because I'd feel comfortable with him and knowing if I saw him there again I'd say, 'oh, yeah, I had a good experience with that assistant.'" She later noted that her sales associate seemed more interested in the job than the heterosexual associates: "I think that a lot of sales assistants do get into a bit of a rut in that they're sort of.... A heterosexual sales assistant would be working their normal hours, it's hard to sort of put into words, but he [gay male sales associate] just seemed more attentive and I find that ... I don't know perhaps gay people are just more attentive in retail stores than others, I don't know."

A common finding is that GM sales associates seem to display greater knowledge and more positive attitudes in retail settings than their heterosexual counterparts. Still, other informants noted that they often feel more comfortable asking a gay man for assistance because of their fear of judgment from other women. Thus, the genuineness that heterosexual women attribute to GM sales associates may have less to do with the associates' actions and more to do with their own inferiority complex.

3.4.3 | Trustworthiness

Four (17%) informants noted that they viewed their gay sales associate as trustworthy. A 20-year-old informant noted the role of attractiveness: "The more attractive the gay male employee is, the more likely I am to trust his opinion; but it's the opposite effect with a female; the more attractive means less product knowledge." Similarly, a 39-year-old informant based her trustworthiness in the gay sales associate on the "coming-out" process. She remarked, "I'm not gay, but I think obviously being gay, it takes a lot to come out and openly be gay and that person is obviously true to themselves so then they would be living that through every other area of their life you know ... they wouldn't sort of hold back anything. They may sugarcoat something but they wouldn't hold back in giving you an honest answer." In other words, this customer believes that women are wary of other sales associates' honesty, as compared with gay men.

One (4%) 20-year-old informant noted that her gay sales associate made her feel important. Although only one informant used the term "important," a theme that emerged in the findings is that the informants tended to believe that GM sales associates are more likely than female associates to spend time with them to help them feel good about themselves. Indeed, the informants used terms such as "less judgmental" and "more honest" to compare GM sales associates with HF sales associates. The findings also suggest that many female customers have difficulty accepting advice from a more attractive female; thus, GM sales associates may have an upper hand in retail settings simply because they are not female.

3.5 | Discussion

Study 1 reveals that HF shoppers experience feelings of comfort, genuineness, trustworthiness, and importance during their interactions with GM sales associates. According to prior research (Rosenbaum et al., 2017), these positive feelings arise from the lack of intrasexual female competition and sexual interest between GM sales associates and HF customers, especially given the need for closeness or touch when working with apparel, cosmetics, or accessories in retailing contexts.

The descriptive data further reveal that HF shoppers may perceive the advice from GM sales associates as more trustworthy than advice from their HF counterparts. Indeed, evolutionarily-

informed research finds that women put greater trust in gay men's (vs. heterosexual women's) advice because of the lack of intrasexual rivalry (Russell et al., 2013, 2017); thus, trust is the foundation of these close and meaningful relationships between gay men and heterosexual women. In a similar vein, trust and commitment represent "the twin foundations of [relationship marketing]" (Sheth, 2017, p.7), and Price and Arnould (1999), p.44) consider trust "the central feature of effective business relationships" and the bedrock of commercial friendships between service providers and their customers.

Although trust is often the impetus behind customer-service provider relationships and friendships, the retailing discipline lacks empirical understanding of how trust ensues between GM sales associates and HF customers in retail contexts. Study 2 addresses this research chasm by exploring why women's trust in GM sales associates may emerge in retail settings, with a further goal of understanding the role of female intrasexual competition.

4 | STUDY 2

As previously discussed, the evolutionary theory posits that competitive rivalry sometimes present in women's same-sex social interactions can lead women to distrust their same-sex peers (Fisher, 2017). As such, the lack of intrasexual rivalry between gay men and heterosexual women encourages many women to put more trust in gay men's advice, especially when they perceive increased competition from same-sex others, such as in dating contexts (Russell et al., 2017). The humanistic evidence obtained in Study 1 reveals that female consumers often perceive advice from GM sales associates as trustworthy; however, empirical evidence for this relationship is absent.

The purpose of Study 2 is to empirically investigate the extent to which perceived intrasexual competition influences heterosexual women's perceptions of trust in advice from HF and GM sales associates in retail contexts. Drawing on past evolutionarily-informed research (Russell et al., 2017), this study predicts that HF shoppers who perceive high appearance-related competitiveness with HF sales associates will perceive GM sales associates as more trustworthy.

4.1 | Sample and procedures

The final sample consisted of 365 undergraduate HF students ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.45$; standard deviation [SD] $_{\text{age}} = 3.44$) from a mid-sized university located in a metropolitan city in the United States who agreed to participate in the study through the university's participant pool recruitment system. In terms of ethnicity, 280 (77%) participants reported being Caucasian, 49 (13%) Hispanic, 13 (4%) African American, 13 (4%) Asian, and 10 (2%) "other" ethnicity. All participants received partial course credit for their participation.

To assess women's trust in both a HF and a GM sales associate, participants indicated their level of agreement with three items, assessed on 7-point Likert scales: (a) "I could see myself trusting an HF sales associate's recommendations," (b) "I could count on an HF sales associate to give me an unbiased opinion on what looks good on my body," and (c) "I believe that an HF sales associate would have my best interests in mind." Participants then indicated their agreement with the same items about GM sales associates. A reliability analysis indicated that these three items were valid (Nunnally, 1978) for both types of sales associates (trust in GM sales associates: $\alpha = .81$; trust in HF sales associates: $\alpha = .78$).

To prevent order effects, the HF and GM trust items appeared in random order. To explore intrasexual female competition, participants indicated their level of agreement with four items (7-point Likert scale) that measured their concern about appearance-related competitiveness with an HF sales associate: (a) feeling "in competition" with the sales associate, (b) the sales associate being more attractive than they are, (c) what their body looked like compared with the sales associates, and (d) feeling a sense of appearance-related rivalry with the sales associate. Another reliability analysis of these four items revealed that together these items were a valid measure of perceived appearance-related competitiveness ($\alpha = .90$; Nunnally, 1978).

Participants completed the study online. Before beginning the study, they were told that they would be taking part in a study examining how they perceive themselves compared with different individuals in consumer settings. Then, participants completed the series of measures in the order specified previously.

4.2 | Results

The data were first screened for acquiescent response bias (i.e., participants who consistently provided the same response across both positively and negatively scored items; Watson, 1992). Cases whose data exhibited this pattern ($n = 33$) were removed from the dataset, which left data from 365 participants for analyses.

A two-step cluster analysis analyzed the data for the four items assessing concern about being in intrasexual competition with an HF sales associate. An optimum number of clusters, a log-likelihood distance measure, and Schwarz's Bayesian information criterion were employed. The analysis revealed two clusters with good cluster quality. The first cluster comprised 58.6% of the cases and was associated with lower levels of intrasexual competition (four-item average = 1.97). The second cluster comprised 41.4% of the cases and was associated with higher levels of intrasexual competition (four-item average = 4.67).

Next, a 2×2 mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) examined women's level of perceived trust in each sales associate (within-subject variable) depending on each participant's predicted cluster membership (between-subjects variable). As predicted, the ANOVA showed a two-way interaction between the type of sales associate (HF vs. GM) and the cluster membership (low vs. high intrasexual competition; $F(1, 363) = 5.88$; $p = .02$).

Pairwise comparisons revealed that women who scored higher (vs. lower) on intrasexual competition were less likely to trust recommendations from HF sales associates ($F(1, 363) = 4.47$; $p = .04$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$). In addition, women's likelihood to trust GM sales associates over HF sales associates was evident in the high intrasexual competition cluster ($F(1, 363) = 21.65$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$), which represents a medium effect (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012). The results showed no significant difference in trust between the two sales associates in the low intrasexual competition cluster ($F(1, 363) = 3.13$; $p = .08$). Thus, the intrasexual competition encourages female shoppers to view advice from GM sales associates as more trustworthy than advice from HF sales associates. Figure 2 reports the mean results.

5 | STUDY 3

Study 2 found evidence that women's concerns about being in appearance-related competition with heterosexual women lead them to trust GM sales associates' product suggestions more than female sales associates' suggestions. However, if women's distrust of female sales associates is driven by feelings of intrasexual competitiveness, the findings should show that women's trust in GM sales associates' suggestions is limited to appearance-enhancing products (e.g., apparel), as these products can play an important role in mate competition. For products that do not play such a role; however, women should trust GM sales associates no more or less than HF sales associates.

Study 3 tests this hypothesis using an experimental design. The prediction was that female shoppers' increased trust in gay men (vs. heterosexual women) would be evident when they received suggestions on products that function to potentially enhance their physical appearance, but not when they received suggestions on products that do not serve this function. Although it is plausible that female buyers may trust heterosexual men's product recommendations to the same degree as gay men's recommendations

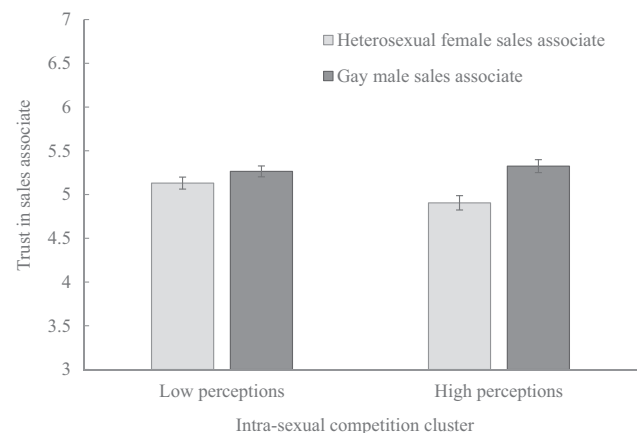


FIGURE 2 Women's trust in heterosexual female versus gay male sales associates when perceiving intrasexual competition

(as heterosexual men are not in intrasexual competition with women), the prediction was that they would not, given previous research revealing women's decreased comfort in interacting with straight (vs. gay) men (Russell, Ta, & Ickes, 2018b) and their reduced preference for working with straight men in such sales interactions due to potential sexual concerns (Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

5.1 | Sample and procedures

Two hundred and forty-three women ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.49$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.48$) took part in this study, 84 from the participant pool recruitment system at a mid-sized university located in a metropolitan city in the United States and 160 from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Of the participants, 141 (58%) reported their ethnicity as Caucasian, 28 (12%) as Hispanic, 32 (13%) as Asian, 15 (6%) as African American, 16 (7%) as Indian, and 11 (4%) as another ethnicity or missing. The participants recruited from the university received course credit, and those recruited from Mechanical Turk received \$0.50 for their participation.¹

Three different conditions were generated using two target sales associate photographs; each photograph was embedded in a fictitious, computer-generated LinkedIn profile.² Participants viewed their assigned target's LinkedIn profile, which contained (a) a photographic image of the target; (b) the target's employment information (e.g., "works at Macy's"); and (c) a professional organization to which the target belonged. However, the target's sex and sexual orientation varied across three conditions: one profile belonged to an HF sales associate, one to a heterosexual male sales associate, and one to a GM sales associate. To manipulate the gender of the target, a professional headshot photograph of a man and a woman was used, and the professional organization on each profile provided an indication of the target's sexual orientation. For example, the gay man's LinkedIn profile indicated that he was a member of "Dallas Gay Business Professionals," and the profiles of the heterosexual man and woman indicated that he and she were members of "Dallas Business Professionals."

For the two photographs selected, both individuals appeared to be the same age, looked professional, and were equally attractive. However, to ensure that the male and female stimuli did not vary on these dimensions, an independent sample of judges ($n = 37$) rated the targets on (a) their perceived age; (b) their perceived professionalism, on a Likert-type scale (1 = very unprofessional, 7 = very professional); and (c) their attractiveness, on a Likert-type scale (1 = very

unattractive, 7 = very attractive). Three paired-sample t tests then compared the ratings of the two targets. The analysis revealed that the male and female targets did not vary in perceived age ($M_{\text{male}} = 28.65$, $M_{\text{female}} = 28.27$; $p = .58$), perceived professionalism ($M_{\text{male}} = 5.81$, $M_{\text{female}} = 5.84$; $p = .91$), or perceived physical attractiveness ($M_{\text{male}} = 5.22$, $M_{\text{female}} = 5.05$; $p = .57$), though the mean attractiveness of the sales associates was well above the midpoint of the scale (i.e., above-average attractiveness).

In terms of product stimuli, six different product photographs served as the sales associate's recommended products.² Three products were chosen for their potential to positively affect the physical appearance of a female buyer (i.e., a woman's dress, a pair of women's high-heeled shoes, and a tube of lipstick). These items served as the "appearance-enhancing" products. The other three product stimuli (i.e., kitchen blender, suitcase, and vacuum cleaner) were unlikely to positively affect a female shopper's physical appearance but were products also easily found in retail department stores. These items served as the "nonappearance-enhancing" (control) items. Finally, regardless of product type, all the photographs were converted to black-and-white images to minimize the potential role of color in participants' evaluations.

5.2 | Design

This experiment was a 3 (sales associate target: HF vs. heterosexual male vs. GM) \times 2 (product: appearance-enhancing vs. control) between-subjects factorial design. Participants completed the study online and were told that they would be participating in an experiment examining their expected buyer behavior in retail stores.

When the participants logged in to complete the experiment, they were informed that they would be viewing the LinkedIn profile of a sales associate who resides in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. To bolster the believability of this cover story, the participants were instructed to wait for 10–20 s until a sales associate's LinkedIn profile was "pulled at random" from the Internet. Unbeknownst to the participants; however, they were randomly assigned to view one of the two target stimuli conditions. After the participants viewed their assigned target's profile, they were asked to imagine that they were in a department store to buy the three appearance-enhancing items (i.e., a dress, shoes, and lipstick) or the three control items (i.e., a blender, suitcase, and vacuum). Then, they were asked to imagine a situation in which they were being assisted by their assigned sales associate.

Participants were then presented with a scenario in which they were instructed to imagine picking out store items. As part of the procedure, participants viewed three different sets of four similar products from which to choose. For example, participants assigned to view the appearance-enhancing products were presented with four different dresses and instructed to select the dress that they would like to add to their shopping cart. The participants in this condition repeated this task by also selecting from four different high-heeled

¹While this compensation was well within the norms for Mechanical Turk workers (Dupuis, Endicott-Popovsky, & Crossler, 2013), it is nevertheless under the minimum wage standards in the United States. Low payment for Mechanical Turk workers is a growing ethical concern.

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shoes and four different lipstick tubes. Participants assigned to the control product condition viewed three sets of control products (i.e., four kitchen blenders, four suitcases, and four vacuum cleaners) and then were instructed to select one item from each set.

After participants selected an item from each product set, they were presented with another scenario in which they were asked to imagine that the sales associate from the LinkedIn profile (“Taylor”) evaluated their options and provided feedback. For example, the scenario read: “Imagine that Taylor examines the items that you have just selected. Then, imagine that Taylor says: ‘Your choices seem great, but I have some suggestions that you should consider buying instead. I have them in the back.’”

Participants were then presented with each of the three appearance-enhancing or control products with a recommendation from Taylor. For example, the participants who viewed the image of the dress also saw Taylor’s endorsement of the product (e.g., “I think that you should buy this dress instead. It has a similar price to the item that you chose originally, and it would look great on you”). Participants then rated how likely they would be (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely) to trust Taylor’s recommendation instead of the original dress choice they had selected previously.

Last, the participants were asked to report the sexual orientation of the sales associate that they imagined interacting with, which served as the manipulation check for the study. Data from participants who failed to correctly report the sexual orientation of their assigned sales associate were excluded from the analysis ($n = 25$), resulting in a sample of 219 heterosexual women.

5.3 | Results

Two composite scores for the participants’ likelihood to trust the sales associates’ control product suggestions ($\alpha = .81$) and the appearance-enhancing product suggestions ($\alpha = .71$) were computed by averaging their responses to the three items in each category. Then, a 2×3 between-subjects factorial ANOVA assessed whether participants’ trust varied as a function of (a) the type of product (control vs. appearance-enhancing) and (b) the sales associate (heterosexual woman vs. heterosexual man vs. gay man). As expected, the results of the ANOVA revealed a significant two-way interaction ($F(2, 213) = 4.43$; $p = .013$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$), as shown in Figure 3.

To probe this interaction, the simple effect of the sales associate target within each product type was examined. The results revealed a significant difference in participants’ likelihood to trust the three sales associates’ appearance-enhancing product suggestions ($F(2, 213) = 8.36$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$); the participants were more likely to trust the GM sales associate’s suggestions ($M = 4.74$; standard error [SE] = 0.22) than the heterosexual male ($M = 3.50$; SE = 0.22) or HF ($M = 4.05$; SE = 0.21) sales associate’s suggestions.

By contrast, participants did not differ in their perceived likelihood to trust a gay man or heterosexual woman when they received recommendations for products that did not function to

enhance their physical appearance; there was no significant effect of the control product type on women’s differential likelihood to trust the sales associates ($F(2, 213) = 2.67$, ns). Together, these results show that women are more likely to trust product recommendations made by GM sales associates (vs. their HF or male counterparts) when choosing merchandise that serves an appearance-enhancement function.

6 | STUDY 4

The results of Study 3 provide support for the hypothesis that women are more likely to trust appearance-enhancement product recommendations from GM sales associates than from either heterosexual male or female sales associates. Moreover, these findings are consistent with past research showing that women perceive gay men to provide more trustworthy mating advice than straight men and women (Russell et al., 2013). However, the reasoning behind women’s increased likelihood to trust recommendations from GM sales associates can be extended further to a nuanced set of predictions about the contexts in which the observed effect is most likely to occur on the sales floor.

Previous research indicates that in mating-relevant contexts, women, especially those who are highly attractive and desirable, are likely to be competitively targeted by other envious heterosexual women (Krems, Neuberg, Filip-Crawford, & Kenrick, 2015; Leenaars, Dane, & Marini, 2008; Russell, Babcock, Lewis, Ta, & Ickes, 2018a). As such, women—particularly those who are more physically attractive than other women—may be sensitive to the quality of advice provided by an HF sales associate when they are looking to purchase products to attract a desirable partner. For example, female customers may experience discomfort consulting with a female sales associate in such a context because they may perceive themselves to be in rivalry with the sales associate. By contrast, because GM sales associates are not in competition with women for the same mates (Russell et al., 2017), attractive female customers should perceive gay

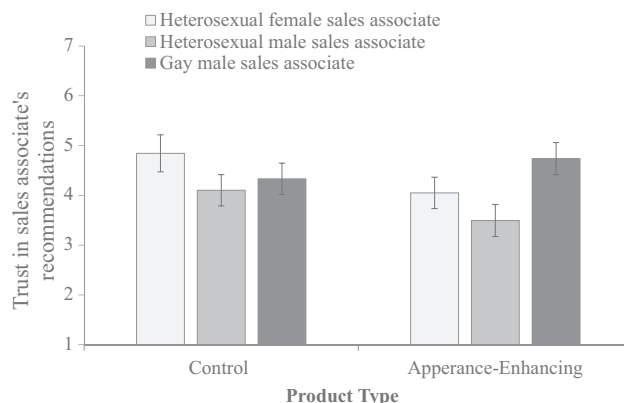


FIGURE 3 Women’s trust in heterosexual female versus heterosexual male versus gay male sales associates when buying appearance-enhancing versus control items

men as more benevolent in these contexts and therefore be more likely to trust their product suggestions. Consistent with this reasoning, past research finds that more attractive women place greater value on gay men's mating-relevant advice (Russell et al., 2018a).

When female customers consult with sales associates in buying products for nonmating-related occasions; however, there are no apparent reasons they should feel less comfortable working with HF than GM sales associates. For example, a female shopper who is searching for an outfit to wear to a family event—regardless of how attractive she is—would have equal reason to trust the opinion of a gay man and a heterosexual woman because of the absence of mating motives that may elicit feelings of intrasexual rivalry over physical appearance.

The predictions for Study 4 were as follows: women would be more likely to (a) perceive good intent on the part of the GM sales associate and (b) trust a GM sales associate's appearance-enhancing product recommendations more than a HF sales associate's recommendations, especially when intending to use the product for a mating-related objective (i.e., to look nice for potential mates) but not for a nonmating-related objective (i.e., to look nice for relatives). In addition, this effect was predicted to be driven by attractive women (who are at risk for facing intrasexual rivalry from other women; Krems et al., 2015; Leenaars et al., 2008; Russell et al., 2018a), such that more attractive women who were assigned to the mating-related objective condition would be more likely to perceive the GM sales associate as having good intent, which in turn would lead to increased trust in his product recommendations.

6.1 | Sample and procedure

One hundred seventy-one undergraduate HF students ($M_{age} = 20.39$; $SD_{age} = 4.22$) recruited from a mid-sized university's psychology participant pool took part in the study. All participants received partial course credit for taking part in the study. The sample was 28% Caucasian, 30% Hispanic, 20% African American, 15% Asian, and 7% "other" ethnicity.

Two priming vignettes served as the two buying-objective conditions for the study. The first buying-objective vignette asked participants to imagine themselves in a situation in which they needed to purchase an outfit to wear to a public party downtown where attractive single men would be in attendance. This priming vignette served as the mating-related objective. The second buying-objective vignette, which introduced the nonmating-related objective, asked participants to imagine themselves in a situation in which they needed to purchase an outfit to wear to a party at their parents' house where their parents and relatives would be in attendance. The Appendix provides the full texts of the priming vignettes.

The study used the same categories of appearance-enhancing products (i.e., a dress, high-heeled shoes, and a tube of lipstick) for the product stimuli as in Study 3. However, given the salience of the

two buyer objectives in Study 4, certain appearance-enhancing products (e.g., a dress) may be more appropriate to wear for one occasion than another. For example, female buyers may be less likely to purchase and wear a "more revealing" outfit when they intend to go to a party with family members than when they intend to go downtown to attract a potential mate. Thus, the product stimuli needed not only to be average in perceived desirability but also to be versatile across different occasions. An independent group of female judges ($n = 18$) rated the appearance-enhancing products on two statements as they viewed each product: (a) "This item could be worn to go out" and (b) This item could be worn to a family party." A paired-sample t test revealed that the products did not significantly differ on these measures ($t(16) = 0.74$; $p = .47$), indicating that the product stimuli were functionally versatile across contexts. Finally, Study 4 also used the same target sales associate stimuli as in Study 3.

6.2 | Design

The experiment was a 2 (buyer objective: mating vs. nonmating) \times 2 (target sales associate: straight female vs. GM) between-subjects factorial design. Participants completed the study online. When they logged online to complete the experiment, they read the same cover story as in Study 3. After providing their consent to participate, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two target stimuli conditions that depicted the target's LinkedIn profile.

After participants viewed the target's LinkedIn profile, the computer randomly assigned them to one of the two buying-objective conditions. Participants were instructed to imagine that they either (a) needed to buy a new outfit to wear to a party downtown with single attractive men in attendance (mating-related objective) or (b) needed a new outfit to wear to a party at their parents' house with their family and relatives in attendance (nonmating-related objective). To further prime the buyer objective, participants were asked to write down their thoughts and feelings about the upcoming party for 3 min.

Next, participants were asked to imagine being in a Macy's department store with their assigned sales associate (i.e., Taylor) to buy the three appearance-enhancing products to complete their outfit for the party. Participants then rated three items designed to assess their perception of whether or not Taylor had good intentions in their sales interaction on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The three items were (a) "I think that Taylor would want me to look my best for those at the party," (b) "I believe Taylor would make me feel good as he/she helps me try different items," and (c) "I think that Taylor would have the best intentions for me."

Participants then read a scenario that instructed them to imagine picking out items they wanted to purchase and adding them to their shopping cart. Similar to Study 3's procedure, the participants saw three different sets of four similar products: four dresses, four high-heeled shoes, and four tubes of lipstick. Participants were instructed

to select the item from each set that they would like to add to their shopping cart for purchase.

Next, participants read another scenario that asked them to imagine that the sales associate from the LinkedIn profile ("Taylor") had evaluated their options and told them that they should consider his or her recommendations ("Your options seem great, but I have some suggestions that you should consider buying for the party instead"). On the next screen, participants saw the product stimuli and read instructions that they should imagine Taylor endorsing the product (e.g., "I think that you should buy this dress instead for the party. It would look great on you"). After reading this prompt for each of the three products recommended by Taylor, participants indicated how likely they would be to trust Taylor's product recommendations on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely).

At the end of the experiment, participants reported on (a) their own perceived attractiveness on a 7-point scale ("Relative to my peer group, I consider myself ____," 1 = Much less attractive, 7 = much more attractive) and (b) the sexual orientation of the sales associate they imagined interacting with to serve as the manipulation check. Participants who failed to correctly report the sexual orientation of their assigned sales associate were excluded from the analysis ($n = 11$), resulting in a sample of 160 heterosexual women.

6.3 | Results

Before the analysis, as the composite variable, participants' trust in the sales associate's recommendations for each of the three appearance-enhancing products was averaged ($\alpha = .78$). Then, a 2×2 between-subjects factorial multivariate ANOVA tested the effects of the sexual orientation of the sales associate (straight woman vs. gay man) and the buyer objective (nonmating vs. mating)

on (a) participants' perceived intent of the sales associates and (b) their reported likelihood to trust the sales associate's product recommendations.

The results revealed a multivariate, two-way interaction between the sales associate and the participant's buyer objective ($\Lambda = 0.95$, mult. $F(2, 155) = 4.22$; $p = .016$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$). This two-way interaction was evident for participants' perceived intent of the sales associate ($F(1, 156) = 7.24$; $p = .008$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$) and trust in the sales associate's recommendations ($F(1, 156) = 5.29$; $p = .023$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$). Participants assigned to the mating-related objective condition perceived higher positive intent on the part of the GM sales associate ($M = 5.38$; $SE = 0.18$) than the HF associate ($M = 4.82$; $SE = 0.17$; $F(1, 156) = 5.23$; $p = .024$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$) and were more likely to trust the GM sales associate ($M = 4.97$; $SE = 0.21$) than the HF associate ($M = 3.82$; $SE = 0.20$; $F(1, 156) = 16.09$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$). There were no differences in these two measures for participants assigned to the nonmating-related condition ($ps > .13$; see Figure 4).

For the next set of predictions, a moderated mediation analysis (5,000 bootstrap samples, Model 12 of PROCESS Macro; Hayes, 2018) tested for a three-way interaction among the sales associate condition (HF vs. GM), the buyer objective condition (mating vs. nonmating), and the female buyer's perceived attractiveness to predict her perception of the sales associate's positive intent. Then, the analysis tested whether the perceived intent of the sales associate predicted female buyers' trust in the sales associate's product recommendations.

The model accounted for a significant proportion of variance in participants' likelihood to trust the sales associate ($R^2 = 0.31$; $F(2, 157) = 35.24$; $p < .001$). As predicted, the model revealed the predicted three-way interaction ($b = 0.78$; $SE = 0.29$; $t(152) = 2.68$; $p = .008$). To probe this interaction, the authors tested for the presence of the two-way interaction between the buyer objective and sales associate condition at both low (-1 SD) and high ($+1$ SD)

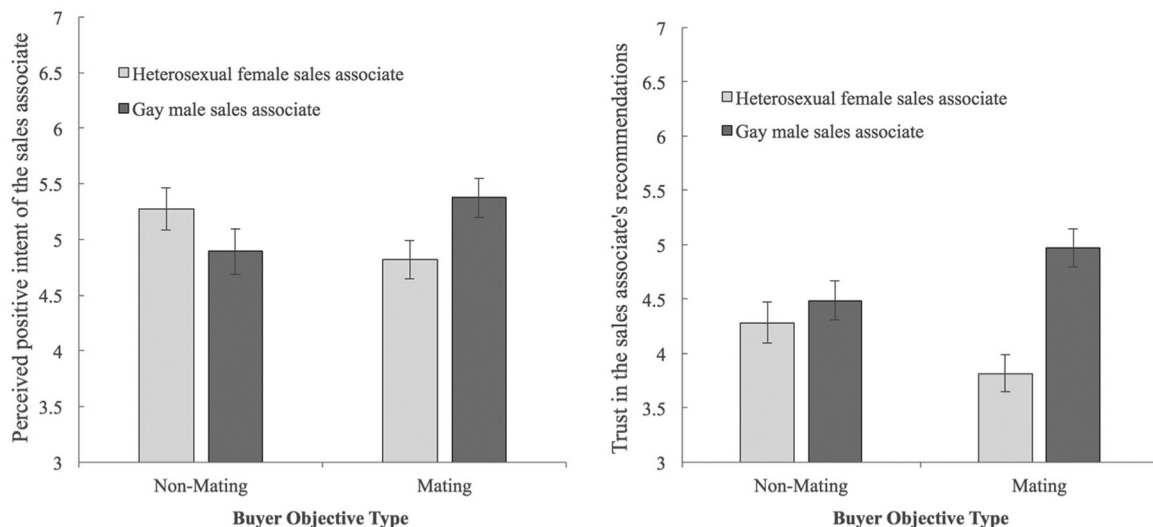


FIGURE 4 Women's perceived intent of the heterosexual female versus gay male sales associate and their likelihood to trust her or his appearance-enhancing product recommendations under either a mating- or nonmating-related buyer objective

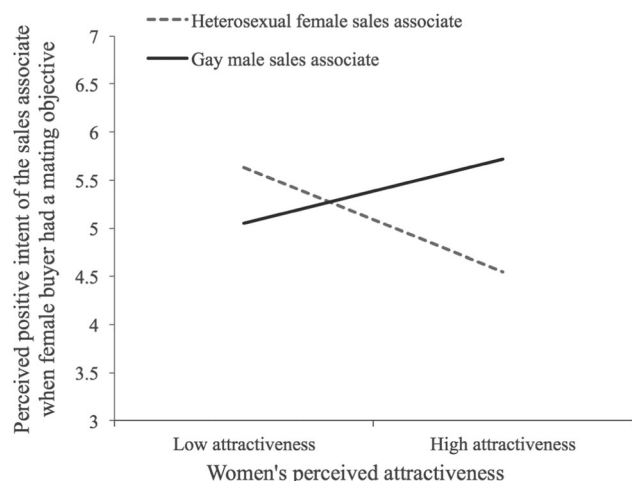


FIGURE 5 Women's perceived intent of the heterosexual female versus gay male sales associate as a function of the women's perceived physical attractiveness

levels of women's self-perceived attractiveness. The results revealed no significant two-way interaction at low levels of women's perceived attractiveness ($p = .87$); however, there was a significant two-way interaction at higher levels of attractiveness ($b = 1.47$; $F(1, 152) = 13.26$; $p < .001$). Further probing of this interaction at each buyer objective condition (mating vs. nonmating) showed that attractive women in the mating-related objective condition were more likely to perceive positive intent on part of the GM sales associate than the HF sales associate ($b = 1.17$; $SE = 0.28$, $t(152) = 4.12$; $p < .001$). There was no such effect among the attractive women in the nonmating-related condition ($p = .30$), see Figure 5.

Next, as expected, the model showed that the more female buyers perceived positive intent on the part of the sales associate, the more they trusted their product recommendations ($b = 0.58$; $SE = 0.09$; $t(157) = 6.60$; $p < .001$). Thus, the analysis revealed a significant index of moderated mediation ($b = 0.46$; $SE = 0.21$; 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.05, 0.88]) at high levels of attractiveness in the mating-related objective condition only. There was also a significant indirect effect of sales associate condition on trust through the perceived intent of the sales associate ($b = 0.70$; $SE = 0.21$; 95% CI = [0.28, 1.08]). In other words, female buyers who perceived themselves as more attractive in the mating-related objective condition were more likely to trust the GM than the HF sales associate's product recommendations because they perceived him as having more positive intentions in their sales interaction.

Importantly, women's increased trust in the GM than the HF sales associate was fully mediated by their perceived positive intent of the associate. There was no direct effect after controlling for the effect of this mediator and the buyer objective and attractiveness moderators in the model ($p = .10$). The results of the moderated mediation model are shown in Figure 6.

7 | DISCUSSION

This research offers an evolutionarily-informed perspective on recent findings that suggest that female shoppers often prefer working with GM sales associates for assistance with certain merchandise selections (Rosenbaum et al., 2015, 2017). Study 1 extends evolutionary studies that show that women have an innate ability to recognize gay men from their heterosexual counterparts in the marketplace (Tabak & Zayas, 2012; Valentova & Havlíček, 2013).

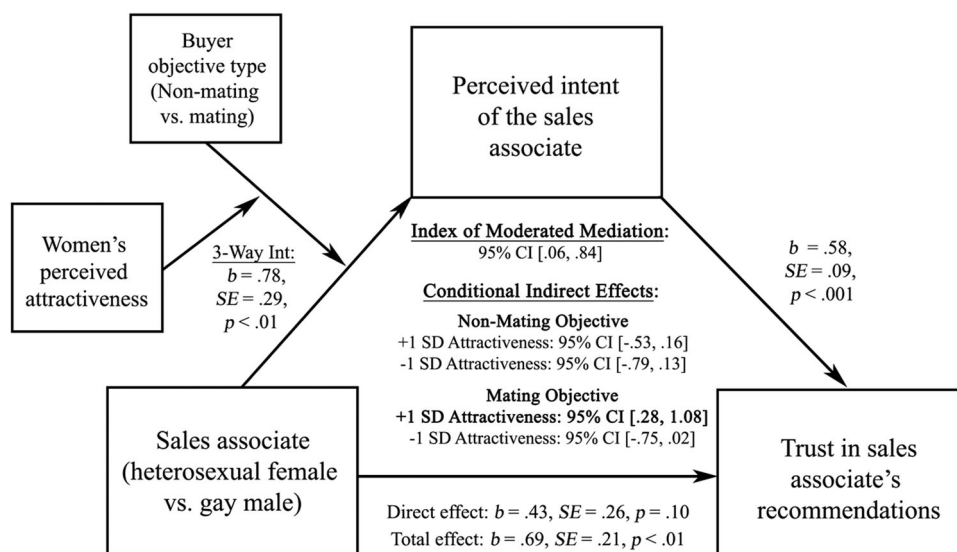


FIGURE 6 Moderated mediation model from Study 4 illustrating the indirect effect of the sales associate condition (heterosexual female vs. gay male) on women's trust in the product recommendation, as mediated by the perceived intent of the sales associate, which was a significant function of the interaction among women's attractiveness, the buyer objective, and the sales associate condition. CI, confidence interval; SD, standard deviation; SE, standard error

More specifically, the data reveal that female shoppers discern a male sales associate's sexual orientation from five different types of physical cues. Several female shoppers also revealed that after recognizing and working with GM associates, they sensed feelings of comfort, and many perceived them as being attentive and trustworthy. Study 2 draws on theories of female intrasexual competition (Buss, 1988; Fink et al., 2014) and demonstrates that female shoppers are more likely to trust recommendations from a GM sales associate when they believe they are in appearance-related rivalry with an HF sales associate. This finding extends the work of Russell et al. (2013, 2017), which shows that women perceive dating advice from gay men as more trustworthy and sincerer than advice from heterosexual women. That is, when female shoppers feel threatened by a female sales associate's physical traits, they may view advice from gay men on items that serve to attract or retain a mating partner (e.g., apparel) more favorably than advice from the female sales associate. Study 3 helps buttress the case of the presence of intrasexual female competition in retailing. That is, the study clarifies that female shoppers' preference for GM sales associates' advice is limited to appearance-enhancing product selections (e.g., apparel, cosmetics) versus selections of other products (e.g., vacuum) that do not elicit feelings of appearance-related competitiveness between female sales associates and their less attractive female customers. Consistent with prior research showing that attractive women are more at risk for intrasexual rivalry and place greater value on gay men's mating-relevant advice (Russell et al., 2018a), Study 4 shows that attractive women are more likely to trust GM (vs. HF) sales associates when purchasing products to attract a romantic partner. This effect is mediated by increased perceptions of the positive intent on the part of GM sales associates.

7.1 | Theoretical implications

These studies contribute to an evolutionary paradigm in marketing regarding the role of intrasexual competition between heterosexual men (Otterbring, Ringler, Sirianni, & Gustafsson, 2018) and women (Prendergast et al., 2014) in retail settings, as well as its influence on merchandise selection and sales associate preference. More specifically, this research shows that intrasexual competition may encourage female shoppers to select a GM sales associate when they discern the presence of one on a sales floor. As such, future research should explore the extent to which intrasexual competition motivates female shoppers to purchase items via e-commerce, catalogs, or home shopping to escape feelings of rivalry or to retaliate against more attractive female associates with complaints or low customer satisfaction scores. Furthermore, given the existence of intrasexual competition in the business-to-consumer marketplace, the rivalry is also likely to arise in business-to-business professional and sales relationships, which may cause women to react negatively to sales overtures from same-sex others.

This work helps further clarify the contexts and interpersonal factors that might foster commercial friendships among HF shoppers

and GM sales associates. Past qualitative research finds that women exhibit a heightened preference for working with GM sales associates when they are older or heavier than a female sales associate (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Consistent with this past work, Study 2 demonstrates that women who perceive high appearance-related competition with HF sales associates report placing greater trust in the advice of GM sales associates. However, Study 4 reveals that highly attractive female shoppers may also prefer working with GM associates, albeit for a different reason. Given that highly attractive women face the risk of being competitively targeted by envious same-sex others (Leenaars et al., 2008; Russell et al., 2018b), these women are more likely to value mating-relevant advice from gay men and prefer GM friends (Russell et al., 2018b). In line with this reasoning, Study 4 demonstrated that, in a mating-objective context, highly attractive women were more likely to trust the product recommendations of a GM (vs. HF) sales associate because they perceived him as having more positive intentions in their sales interaction. Taken together, this work illustrates that women's preference for and trust in GM sales associates (as compared to their female counterparts) is likely to be heightened in women who are concerned about negative appearance comparison with female sales associates or likely to experience intrasexual rivalry from other women.

This research also suggests that pioneering theoretical and empirical opportunities abound for researchers to investigate women's feelings when working with metrosexual sales associates in retail settings. Aldrich (2004, p.1733) conceptualizes a metrosexual male as a heterosexual male who "is nevertheless in touch with his feminine side"; however, other researchers typically label metrosexuals as either gay or bisexual (Coad, 2008). Metrosexuality is often associated with trendiness, a concern with one's appearance, the use of grooming practices, and feminine proclivities (Mitchell & Lodhia, 2017). Therefore, in marketplace situations in which they feel uncomfortable working with a more attractive or younger female sales associate, female shoppers will likely show a preference for working with a metrosexual-appearing male sales associate, if one is available on the sales floor.

7.2 | Managerial implications

Given that gay men living in the United States face discrimination in the hiring process (Tilcsik, 2011), the managerial implications of the findings suggest that retail organizations should work to increase diversity and not discriminate against gay men in the hiring process. To be clear, the authors are not suggesting recruitment preferences based on sexual orientation, as this would be discriminatory; rather, the findings reveal that some female shoppers may be inclined to avoid retail settings in which they sense rivalry or a disrupted self-concept. At the same time, heterosexual men may also feel intimidated when working with a younger and more attractive male sales associates (Otterbring et al., 2018).

This research suggests that physical retailers, particularly high-end specialty stores and luxury boutiques, may benefit from hiring a

diverse workforce. This is because customers may be intimidated by sales associates for reasons beyond their control, and thus diversity offers customers the option to work with preferable associates. The lack of a diverse workforce may be a reason for consumers who feel stigmatized in retail settings (e.g., overweight, aging) to patronize online retailers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

The findings also offer provocative insights for GM retail employees. Gay retail employees who learn subcultural “campy” signals of flamboyance (Kates, 2002) and display them in retail settings may realize monetary benefits by attracting female customers. Yet these same employees may experience backlash from other customers who misinterpret these signals or find them too explicit in nature (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005). Furthermore, as an increasing number of countries permit homosexuals to marry and more people are accepting of homosexuality in general (Brown, 2017), “market-manifested stereotypes of gayness” (Ginder & Byun, 2015, p.835) might prevail or dissipate as gay identity becomes increasingly mainstream and accepted in these countries.

7.3 | Research limitations and future directions

Although the present findings make a case for the role intrasexual female competition plays in female shoppers’ trust in GM sales associates, more research remains to be done. One limitation inherent in the current experimental studies is their reliance on a relatively young, college-aged sample of women. It will be important to determine whether the findings from our experimental studies are specific to college-aged heterosexual women or are generalizable to other age groups of women. Given that female intrasexual competition decreases with age (Fernandez, Muñoz-Reyes, & Dufey, 2014), it is possible that older generations of women who are married or approaching the end of their reproductive years would be less concerned with attracting and competing for a mate (relative to younger women). Rather these women may have other reasons for avoiding younger female sales employees—for example, body image self-consciousness. Indeed, previous qualitative research shows that women who are older with heavier body types (i.e., correlates of unattractiveness) are more comfortable consulting with gay men so that they are not directly compared to younger and thinner female sales associates. (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Thus, future experimental research should explore whether these implicit social comparisons operate to steer older and less attractive female shoppers away from working with younger, thinner saleswomen and toward working with gay salesmen.

Second, although we received evidence that women trust GM sales associates’ appearance-enhancing product recommendations when they are intending to use the product for a mating-related purpose (which we attributed to intrasexual competition), it will be informative to explore whether perceived expertise is somehow involved in women’s perceived trust in GM sales associates when women are trying to use products to attract a mate. However, given

that our findings from Study 4 point to women trusting GM sales associates because they perceive greater positive intentionality on their part, it is not highly likely that perceived expertise is influencing this process versus intrasexual female competition. Nonetheless, future research should explore this possibility.

Third, future research should explore women’s sales transactions and perceived trust in other gay-straight sales associate combinations. For example, would HF shoppers trust appearance-enhancing product recommendations provided from lesbian female sales associates? We have reason to believe they would not, considering that—like sales interactions with heterosexual men—lesbian women might be perceived as being sexually attracted to their female shopper clientele, which might cause discomfort and less trusting sales interactions. We, therefore, suspect that the increased trust that women place in GM sales associates’ appearance-enhancement product recommendations may be unique to the commercial relationships between heterosexual women and gay men, which could be an interesting prediction to test in future research.

Further, data for these studies came from participants who resided in metropolitan areas in either Australia or the United States. In both countries, GM sales associates are commonly employed in retail settings, and same-sex marriage is legal; in addition, these metropolitan areas have large gay populations. Thus, the participants were likely to have an awareness of gay men and perhaps to hold a favorable or tolerant opinion of gay men in general. The research findings are likely to generalize to other countries that hold favorable attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people and have legal protections (e.g., human rights, same-sex marriage) but not to countries that criminalize same-sex relations or marginalize LGBTI people from participating in general society (for specific country details, see Human Rights Watch, 2017).

In addition, in Study 1, participants discussed the experience with a confirmed GM sales associate; however, the study did not probe the extent to which an informant had a long-term “commercial friendship” (Price & Arnould, 1999) with the associate. Although researchers have found that feelings of trustworthiness may ensue quickly between customers and employees in retail settings (Rosenbaum, Massiah, & Wozniak, 2013), it is possible that some informants had long relationships with GM sales associates. Thus, the findings do not serve to diminish the likelihood that relationship duration between any customer and service provider helps facilitate feelings of trustworthiness between the parties.

In a similar vein, although intrasexual female competition generalizes across the globe, its impact in retail settings in which GM sales associates are not overtly present (e.g., Persian Gulf, North Africa) will differ. For example, intrasexual competition may encourage some women to retaliate against attractive female sales associates by treating them in an inferior manner or by spending large sums of money to show superiority.

An underlying assumption of the studies presented herein is that heterosexual women can accurately discern the sexual orientation of

a GM sales associate from his physical appearance or participation in a gay professional organization or have knowledge of his sexual orientation before engaging in marketplace exchanges. Undoubtedly, heterosexual women could also mistakenly surmise an incorrect sexual orientation from physical appearance or membership in certain organizations. Furthermore, in Study 1, heterosexual women discussed how they discern homosexual men in retail settings, and many of the clues they mentioned follow long-standing stereotypes that attribute feminine characteristics to gay men.

To be clear, the goal of this article is not to promote gay stereotyping, and not all GM associates display feminine characteristics. Furthermore, in all the studies, heterosexual women assumed, albeit accurately or incorrectly, that they were interacting with a gay man, and they were given no reason to doubt their assumption. Thus, from a theoretical perspective, this article advances an understanding of the marketplace relationship between heterosexual women and gay men. Despite the limitations, this research highlights the innate underpinnings that often encourage HF shoppers to purposefully seek out assistance from GM associates in many retail settings.

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Appendix A

Buying Objectives: Study 4

Mating-Related Objective

Vignette 1:

- Imagine that you are single and you've received an invitation to attend a public party downtown. You received word that a couple of attractive guys that you know will be attending this party, so you are looking forward to the evening and hoping to look nice.
- Please take a couple of minutes to write about your ideal expectations for the evening (e.g., How would you be feeling? What could you see yourself saying? What could you see yourself doing?)

Vignette 2:

- Imagine that you let Taylor know that you are looking for a dress, a pair of shoes, and lipstick. When Taylor asks you what the occasion is for these items, you tell Taylor that you are attending a party downtown, and you are hoping to look nice for some good-looking single men.

Non-Mating-Related Objective

Vignette 1:

- Imagine that you've received an invitation to attend a party at your parents' house. You know that your parents and a few of your older relatives will be there, so you are looking forward to the evening and hoping to look nice for your family.
- Please take a couple of minutes to write about your ideal expectations for the evening (e.g., How would you be feeling? What could you see yourself saying? What could you see yourself doing?)

Vignette 2:

- Imagine that you let Taylor know that you are looking for a dress, a pair of shoes, and lipstick. When Taylor asks you what the occasion is for these items, you tell Taylor that you are attending a party at your parents' house, and you are hoping to look nice for your parents and older relatives.