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Walks of Life: The Journey of (some) Women

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How Men Differentiate Between Girlfriend and Gal Pal

The concept of the Friend Zone is one that has been well documented through film, literature, and even research studies. While there is no set definition for this popular term, Urban Dictionary defines the Friend Zone as, “When a girl decides that you're her friend, you're no longer a dating option. You become this complete non-sexual entity in her eyes, like her brother, or a lamp.” Abiding by this working definition of the term, we can quickly see that the Friend Zone has a strong gender-bias. The definition implies that it is only women who place people into the Friend Zone; entirely neglecting the male aspect. To solidify this belief, most studies on the Friend Zone revolve around what makes a women Friend Zone her male acquaintances. While the term is commonly condemned by women for believing that it is simply a way for men to feel better about being rejected, it is also women who have worked to determine the factors that go into Friend Zoning someone. A study titled, *Can men and women be just friends?* (Bleske & Buss, 2000) found that women prioritize protective and paternal instincts when determining whether to initiate a romantic relationship with their partner. Reading this study, in addition to other articles and film pieces done on the topic, I began to question what would happen if the studies had flipped their genders; i.e. men Friend Zoning women. After speaking to a few males about the topic, I developed the hypothesis that generally speaking, a man would only Friend Zone a female if he was not physically attracted to her. Entering the study, I wanted to expand on that concept, by asking this simple question: How do men differentiate between girlfriend and gal pal?

Method

Participants

This study analyzed 33 participants, all between the ages of 18-28. Of these participants, 32 identified as heterosexual, and the remainder was not included in this study; furthermore, the total will be 32 participants. Participants were asked a series of demographic questions. 31 of the participants identified as male, and 1 did not specify. 29 participants identified that they had close cross sex friends, and 3 did not. 18 participants identified as being single, 13 identified as in a relationship, and 1 did not specify.

Procedures and Instrumentation

All data was collected over a two-week period. Participants were given a printed survey with a clear direction statement, five open-ended questions, and four demographic close-ended questions. The survey questions included the following, and were ordered as such. Question One: How would you personally define the concept of the Friend Zone? This question was asked to develop a male definition of the term, as well as assess the gender-bias influence men had of the term. Question Two: Explain what characteristics you value when initiating a romantic relationship. This question was asked in comparison to Question Three: Explain what characteristics you value when initiating a friendship. Both questions two and three were asked with the intent of establishing a differentiation in initiating multiple types of relationships, and the impact that the initiation could have on the relationship thereafter. Question Four: What is the ideal way in which you would meet a romantic partner? This question was asked to determine if setting played a role in establishing a romantic relationship. Question Five: In what ways do you interact differently with a romantic partner as compared to a platonic female friend? This

question was asked to differentiate between the two relationships styles, and determine what key differences could play a role in determining a girlfriend from a gal pal.

Data Analysis

The data was coded through a series of reading each individual survey, and categorizing them based on similar responses. To do this, the surveys were first typed up into a spreadsheet, which was then printed out and used in place of the handwritten surveys for the remainder of the study; this was to ensure anonymity amongst participants. Next, highlighters were used to group similar responses together using different colors, per each question. Similar responses were determined based on wording and content of the message; i.e. for question five, “intercourse” and “handholding” were both labeled as Physical Intimacy. From all questions combined, 15 categories emerged.

Results

In this study, I found very similar responses from participants; one question even resulting in only one category. Below, the data has been organized per question, and will include participant responses, written as they originally were; i.e. word choice and grammar matches their individual language.

Question One asked participants to define the term Friend Zone. Responses were collected into three categories. 21 participants defined this term as one person having unreciprocated romantic feelings for a friend. P28 summed this up as, “someone you like likes you in a different way as a friend.” Six participants defined the term similarly, but with that gender-bias in affect; developing their category of a male being romantically interested in their female friend, and her not wanting a romantic relationship. P19 stated that the Friend Zone was when, “the woman knows the man likes the woman but the woman doesn’t like the man or think

of him in that way. It sucks.” Lastly, five participants believed the term Friend Zone to be a myth. P22 voiced two separate definitions of the term: “An imaginary construct of men pissed off at women for not throwing themselves at them.” and “A place for weak men to claim they’ve been wronged by women who owe them nothing.”

Question Two asked participants what they valued in a romantic partner. Five participants stated physical attraction as being their most important priority. P10 simply put, “someone that is attractive physically.” Also falling into that category was P32, who explained that, “I’ll see her long before I know anything about her personality.” In contrast, 27 participants listed emotional characteristics/values as priority in a romantic partner. P24 fell very closely to the traditional female-aspect on the Friend Zone, by saying, “...most importantly, someone that makes me feel safe.” In similarity, P21 listed eight separate characteristics he valued, which were, “Humor. Love. Effort. 100% commitment. Motivation. Life. 100%. Trust.”

Question Three asked participants what they valued in a platonic friendship. Overwhelmingly, all participant responses fell under the same category, of characteristics/values. P29 listed that he values, “Politeness, ease, honesty, and sincerity.” P11 also provided a list of traits, which were, “Trust. Common interests. Understanding. Common goals. Supportive.” Multiple responses within this category made particular comments about humor, which P6 summed up as, “The ability to understand sarcasm (mass quantities) and throw it back. The ability to understand the humor in everything.”

Question Four asked participants about how they would like to initiate a romantic relationship. Three participants said they did not care about how it began. P31 stated that, “It doesn’t matter where or when, as long as we laugh”. Nine participants said that they would like to go out with the intent of finding a romantic partner. P8 stated, “...maybe online dating.” In

similarity, P14 was straightforward with the notion, and said ideally, “They’d come up and say they wanted to be in a romantic relationship.” 17 participants said that they would like to first be friends. P9 gave a detailed example, which included, “...become great friends with them before I make any romantic gesture. Because at the end of the day I don’t want to end up with my romantic partner, I want to end up with my best friend...” P2 agreed with this concept, by stating, “Ideally, I would become good friends with this person first before developing romantic interest in them.” Three participants stated that they would prefer an instant attraction. P30 most clearly stated this, by saying he would like to meet his romantic partner by, “Running into them somewhere and instantly feeling a connection as soon as you see them.”

Question Five asked participants how they interact differently with cross-sex friends versus romantic partners. Five participants stated that had created a set of rules and expectations on how they and their cross-sex friend would be able to interact with one another. P7 gave the expectation that, “She hooks me up with dem friends.” P1 had more clear-cut rules, and said, “With a platonic female friend I am cautious about the impression I am conveying, and will speak up if necessary. I will not give them priority, less time, less openness.” Eight participants stated that there would be more emotional intimacy with a romantic partner. P23 said that, “With a romantic partner, I make more of an effort to communicate w/ them regularly, I tell them more details and thoughts about my life.” Similarly, P4 stated, “I’m more open about my feelings.” 13 participants said that the main difference for them was physical intimacy. P18 simply put, “I do not do anything physically romantic to a platonic female friend.” Likewise, P25 stated, “I would be more intimate with a romantic partner.” Three participants felt that there was no difference between interacting with a cross-sex friend versus a romantic partner. P33 explained that, “I would care for both, and want to help both.” In response to how he would act differently with a

romantic partner, P16 quite simply stated, “I don’t.” Three of the participants did not respond to this question.

Discussion

In this study, I analyzed the responses of 32 male participants who discussed why they might Friend Zone a female acquaintance. The responses were overall very similar; showing a lack of differentiation from individual to individual. Overall, the data can be collected into two reasons as to why a man might Friend Zone a woman. Physical and Environmental attraction play a significant role in a male’s level of romantic interest. Whether this can be developed over time or instantaneous, if a male is not attracted to a female –based on either her physical characteristics not aligning with his concept of beauty, or the way in which they met not being one conducive to romantic attraction – than he is likely to Friend Zone her. Emotional attraction is also an important reason he may put someone into the Friend Zone. Similarly to women, if the woman does not align with a man’s core values and characteristics, he will not initiate a long-term romantic relationship.

While there has been limited research done on a male’s perspective of Friend Zoning, the findings of this study do align with the information already existent. A popular forum on reddit.com, containing over 80 comments from men voicing their opinions on “Have you ever been the one friendzoning a girl?” comes to an overwhelming conclusion that men will only do this when they are not physically attracted to a female. There seems to be a pattern, both amongst this forum as well as my own study’s data, that if physical attraction is not an issue for the male, he will only Friend Zone a female if either he or she is in a relationship. To back up this claim, P3, in response to Question Five, said that, “...a female *friend* implies I have a girlfriend already...” While one of my focal categories coming out of this study was that Emotional

Attraction can play a significant role in determining the relationship style a male has with a female, I do find it important to note that this was not found in previous literature. In an article titled "*We never talk about that*": *A comparison of cross-sex friendships and dating relationships on uncertainty and topic avoidance*, it is said that, "...openness is not always synonymous with relationship growth". That is to say that while emotional attraction can *elevate* a friendship into a romantic relationship, it is not as set of a factor as physical attraction is.

This study, in combination with previous research, shows that ultimately men prioritize physical attraction most highly during two poignant stages of Knapp's Relational Development Model; initiating, and intensifying. Based on previous research, this differs greatly from how women determine whether they want to Friend Zone men or not. While I entered this study hoping to find more commonalities between the two, and eliminate the gender-bias associated with this term, I did not find evidence otherwise conclusive. Therefore, to the question of how men differentiate between girlfriend and gal-pal, I would answer that while emotional intimacy and overlapping characteristics do play a role, physical attraction remains the predominant factor.

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