



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

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Rosenbaum, Mark, [Russell-Bennett, Rebekah](#), & [Drennan, Judy](#)
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COMMERCIAL FRIENDSHIPS BETWEEN GAY SALESMEN AND STRAIGHT FEMALE CUSTOMERS

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps it is now sacrosanct in marketing to contemplate that many service encounters, especially those in retail settings, are social encounters in which bonds between and among customers and employees are critical drivers of consumption (Beatty *et al.*, 1996; Rosenbaum, 2006). Indeed, within retail settings, it is often possible for salespeople and customers to form so-called “commercial friendships” (Price and Arnould, 1999). These friendships result in both salespeople and their customers having social interactions that are close to those experienced in personal friendships (Swan *et al.*, 2001), and which are extremely satisfying for all parties.

Thus, it is not surprising that marketing researchers have accepted relationship marketing as a marketing philosophy, or as a marketing paradigm, that focuses on keeping and improving relationships with existing customers rather than on acquiring new customers (Beetles and Harris, 2010; Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler, 2013). The objective of relationship marketing is often the formation of customer intimacy, a situation in which companies, such as Nordstrom, tailor and shape products and services to each customer’s unique needs, which builds customer satisfaction, trust, and ultimately, loyalty (Greacy and Wiersema, 1993; Yim, Tse, and Chan, 2008). Although the tenets of relationship marketing are complete, Price and Arnould (1999) questioned the broadness of the relationship marketing concept, and proposed that friendships that form in commercial settings, between and among customer and employees, describes a type of relationship that mimics a personal friendships; namely, commercial friendships. Interestingly, Price and Arnould (1999) note that commercial friendships are unique because they often bring people from different social worlds together, albeit temporarily and only in commercial settings, in a manner that is beneficial for both service providers and their customers.

On the one hand, researchers may contend that commercial friendships are nothing more than mere marketplace niceties that provide lonely or bored customers with opportunities for social camaraderie (Buttle and Coates, 1984), especially among senior and elderly consumers (Kang and Ridgway, 1996). On the other hand, one cannot deny that commercial friendships are also associated with positive managerial and shareholder outcomes, including commitment, loyalty, positive word-of-mouth (Beatty *et al.*, 1996; Price and Arnould, 1999; Swann *et al.*, 2001). This is not to say that all customers want to have friendships with employees; however, when customers and employees are motivated to exchange reciprocal feelings of companionship with each other, both parties relish the relational benefits of human togetherness (Rosenbaum, 2009).

To date, researchers have considered commercial friendships as being universal options available to all, and explainable as a natural progression, driven by time (Beatty *et al.*, 1996), that moves customers along a relationship continuum from strangers, to acquaintances, to friends, and finally, to partners (Johnson and Seines, 2004). In other words, as interactions proceed and time passes, retail salespeople and their customers may develop deeper and more personal relationships. Although this assumption is valid, service researchers have recently questioned this time-based assumption of retail friendships. That is, research shows that the recognition of

common socio-collective traits between like employees and customers, such as a common country-of-origin or sexual orientation, may serve as foundations for close retail employee-customer relationships (Rosenbaum, Walsh, and Wozniak, 2012). These non-traditional commercial friendships also result in customers demonstrating loyalty to sales associates, while they also reap relational benefits, such as upgrades and discounts (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012).

Outside of marketing, the social science literature (Grigoriou, 2004; Rumens, 2008; Russell, DelPriore, Butterfield, and Hill, 2013) and popular press (de la Cruz and Dolby, 2007; Hopcke and Rafaty, 1999; Tilmann-Healy, 2001, Whitney, 1990) is replete with knowledge regarding the “absolutely fabulous” friendships (Hopcke and Rafaty, 1999) that often form between gay men and straight women. In fact, Western culture regularly highlights the compatibility of gay men and straight women in film, television, and writing, to the extent that they have now influenced popular thinking on the topic, so that gay men and straight females are viewed as sharing common plights and interests (Rumens, 2008).

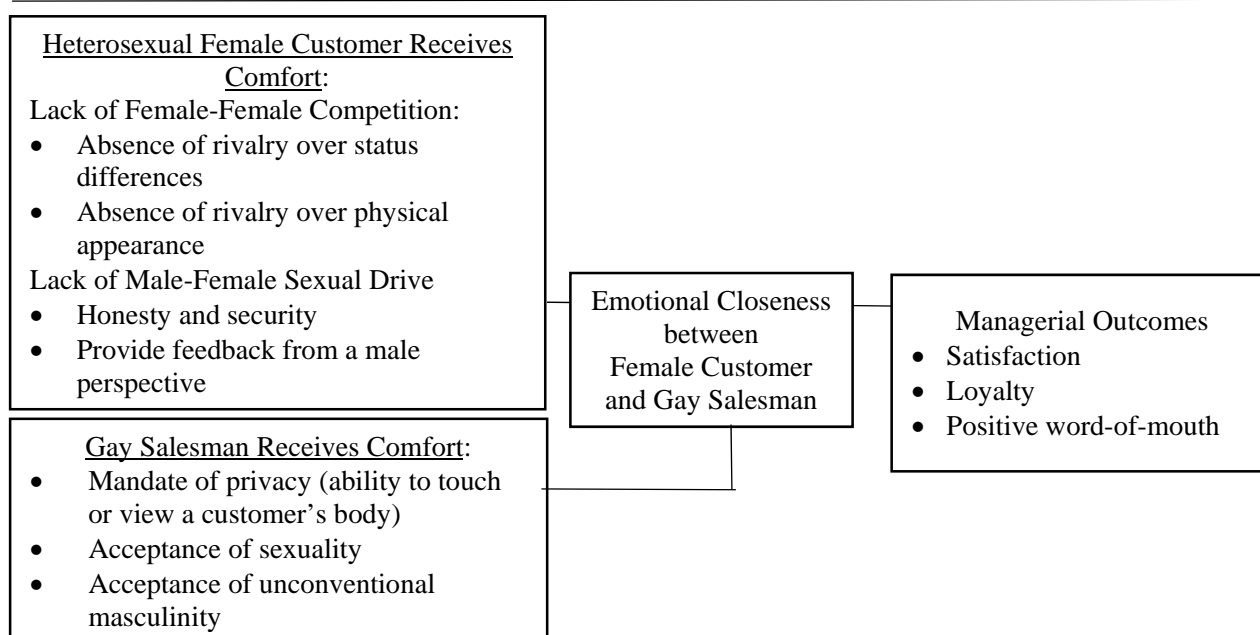
Yet, thus far, marketing researchers have looked askance at the effect of friendships between gay male employees and heterosexual female customers in consumption settings, such as retail stores and boutiques. Indeed, with the exception of Peretz’s (1995) participant observation regarding how young and outwardly gay salesmen use their ambiguous gender to sell women’s clothing, in a Paris-based luxury boutique, any theoretical explorations regarding retail-based commercial friendships between gay salesmen and female customers are non-existent—*until now*.

This research addresses this apparent chasm in the literature by putting forth an original framework that shows how the emotional closeness between gay salesmen and female customers, due to the absence of sexual interest and inter-female competition, results in an intense emotional closeness, that facilitates pleasurable retail transactions, customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth. In doing so, this work extends the commercial friendship paradigm by considering retail-based, commercial friendships between an under-researched marketplace dyad; gay men and straight females. It is worth noting here that some straight women may find the idea of commercial friendships with gay salesmen as undesirable, due to the very notion of having relationships with retail organizations or employees (Noble and Phillips, 2004), or a personal disdain for homosexuality.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 represents a comprehensive framework for explaining why gay salesmen and straight female customers are encouraged to form commercial friendships in retail environments. These retail settings are purported to be high-end department stores, specialty stores, and boutiques, in which a great deal of personalization and intimacy occurs between customers and employees during the in-store selling process. The framework is unique because it draws upon theoretical findings to highlight the relational benefits that both gay salesmen and straight female customers receive by maintaining commercial friendships. These benefits results in both parties receiving comfort and having an emotional closeness with each other, which serves as the foundation of their commercially-based friendships. Further, this emotional closeness fuels positive managerial outcomes, including customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth. In the following section the framework’s conceptual categories are developed.

Figure 1:
Framework for Understanding Gay Salesmen and Straight Female Customer Friendships



GAY SALESMEN AND STRAIGHT FEMALE RETAIL RELATIONSHIPS

From an evolutionary perspective, friendships between gay men and straight women are pointless as neither party is interested in the other for mating purposes. Yet, the literature is clear that gay men and straight women often perceive one another to be trustworthy sources of social support (Russell et al., 2013). To date, how this trust impacts retail has remained unexplored. Figure 1 addresses this void by showing that the relational benefits that female customers receive from working with gay salesmen.

Based upon participant observation, Peretz (1995) noted that boutique employees were either young, gay men, or young, tall, pretty, and slender heterosexual women. Peretz (1995) further noted that gay salesmen tended to work with older female customers, who were 20 to 30 years older in age, and whose weight requires them to try on items and to evaluate their fit. By working with gay salesmen, older and fuller-figured women experience comfort because they do not compete with saleswomen in terms of age (e.g. status) or bodily figure (e.g., physical appearance). Indeed, women with more gay male friends report increased feeling of sexual attractiveness and greater appreciation for their body relative to women who do not have gay male friends (Barlett et al., 2009). This leads us to put forth the following propositions:

P1. Heterosexual female customers receive comfort from working with gay males sales associates due to an absence of inter-female competition stemming from age differences.

P2. Heterosexual female customers receive comfort from working with gay males sales associates due to an absence of inter-female competition stemming from bodily appearances.

In the absence of sexual pressure from heterosexual males, heterosexual female customers feel accepted by gay men for their personality, and they report an increased sense of honesty and security when interacting with gay males compared to heterosexual males (Grigoriou, 2004). Thus, in retail settings, honesty and security may become the foundation of a trustworthy, relationship. Finally, because heterosexual women often purchase high-end items to attract heterosexual males, by working with gay men, female customers receive feedback from a male audience, which focuses on their aesthetic beauty as opposed to their sexual beauty. This discussion leads us to put forth the following propositions:

P3_{a-b}. Heterosexual female customers receive comfort from working with gay males sales due to their receiving feelings of honest (P3_a) and security (P3_b).

P4. Heterosexual female customers receive comfort from working with gay males sales due to their receiving feedback from a male perspective.

In terms of exploring the relational benefits that gay salesmen work with heterosexual females, Peretz (1995) remarks that gay salesmen receive a so-called “mandate of privacy,” which permits them access to their customer’s body, for fittings and readjustments, and to view them in the changing room. By having this mandate, gay salesmen, very much like male gynecologists and hair stylists, are able to easily engage with their female customers, without embarrassment; all in an effort to successfully complete the service exchange.

Additionally, gay men tend to describe their friendships with straight female friends as meaningful and accepting (Grigoriou, 2004); thus, gay salesmen are likely to find acceptance from their heterosexual female customers. Additionally, Hopcke and Raffaty (1999) state that straight females accept their gay male friend’s unconventional masculinity, which is typified by a gentleness, compared to straight males, and a common affinity for cultural and artistic endeavors, which straight males often seem to lack. Hopcke and Raffaty (1999) consider unconventional masculinity as having a hint of femininity. For instance, Peretz (1995) highlights that gay salesmen often accessorize their suits with female scarves; in essence, masculinity with a hint of femininity. Without sounding stereotypical, Hopcke and Raffaty (1999) emphasize that this unconventional masculinity permits women to share things with gay men that are hard to share with their husbands and boyfriends. This leads us to put forth the following propositions:

P5. Gay male sales associates receive comfort from working with heterosexual female customers because they have a “mandate of privacy” which permits them to view or touch customer’s body, including intimate parts.

P6. Gay male sales associates receive comfort from working with heterosexual female customers because they receive acceptance of their sexuality from them.

P7. Gay male sales associates receive comfort from working with heterosexual female customers because they receive acceptance of their unconventional masculinity from them.

This discussion suggests that gay salesmen and heterosexual females can develop emotionally close friendships in retail settings, and that these friendships are laden with honesty, trust, and

social support. The close friendships between gay salesmen and heterosexual customers are then hypothesized to result in positive managerial outcomes, including satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth (Price and Arnould, 1999; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler, 2002). These findings leads us to put forth the following propositions.

P8. Gay male sales associates and female customers who maintain retail-based friendships will report having emotionally close relationships.

P9_{a-c}. Friendships between gay male sales associates heterosexual female customers results in customers reporting (a) satisfaction, (b) a commitment to repatronize the sales associate (loyalty), and (c) plans to engage in positive word-of-mouth regarding the sales associate's retail organization.

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