



## “I’ll wait for him”: Understanding when female shoppers prefer working with gay male sales associates



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Retail employees  
Gay employees  
Gay–straight relationships  
Touch  
Apparel retailing  
Relationship marketing

### ABSTRACT

This article explores an under-researched area in retailing; namely, straight female shoppers’ preferences for working with gay male sales associates. Study 1 employs qualitative methodology to show that female shoppers often prefer working with gay male sales associates when they are older or heavier than female sales associates. Study 2 employs experimental methodology to show that female shoppers desire to work with gay male associates more than their straight male counterparts when they are purchasing merchandise requiring non-sexual intimacy, such as apparel and cosmetics. The results should help retailers understand why many female shoppers willingly, and comfortably, work with gay male sales associates and the role of gay associates in various retail departments.

### 1. Introduction

The U.S. retail industry attracts lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in disproportionately high numbers (Bolcer, 2012; Human Rights Campaign, 2017). Tilcsik et al.’s (2015) work offers insights into this employment phenomenon. In particular, research posits that during their social interactions, gays and lesbians employ “stigma management,” which, in terms of their sexual orientation, leads them to figure out whether “to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (Goffman, 1963, p. 42). Tilcsik et al. (2015) theorize that in adopting stigma management, LGBT people congregate to occupations that permit task independence at work—that is, occupations in which they can perform their tasks without substantially depending on co-workers or supervisors.

Task independence characterizes many retail job requirements, especially in customer-service-intensive luxury retail sales. Task independence permits homosexuals to effortlessly engage in stigma management with others, including co-workers and customers, and to reduce risks associated with disclosure in the workplace, because they can more easily control their level of personal disclosure with others (Tilcsik et al., 2015). Furthermore, given that gays and lesbians tend to develop increased sensitivity and diagnostic accuracy with regard to monitoring others’ facial, bodily, and vocal reactions to them,

Tilcsik et al. (2015) posit that LGBT people are attracted to occupations that require a high degree of “social perceptiveness.” They contend that gays and lesbians thrive in customer service occupations (e.g., education, psychology, massage, and customer service) that require employees to be sensitive to their customers’ spoken and unspoken needs.

Although luxury retailing typically affords gays and lesbians substantial task independence, for homosexuals to financially succeed in many commissioned and non-commissioned retail sales occupations, their customers need to accept, or at least tolerate, their sexual orientation, regardless of whether it is verbally disclosed to them or they intuitively assume it. However, retail research on customers’ willingness to work with homosexual retail employees is sparse. Instead, research has tended to explore “commercial friendships” between retail employees and their customers as a marketplace nicety that emerges from relationship duration (Brady et al., 2012; Gremler and Gwinner, 2000; Gwinner et al., 1998). Other research has shown that commercial friendships can form during retail exchanges because of shared social commonalities between retail employees and their customers, such as a shared sexual orientation or country of origin (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012).

Retailing researchers are only now beginning to investigate working relationships between gay male sales associates and female customers in retail settings (Rosenbaum et al., 2015). This trend follows recent burgeoning attention to gay male–straight friendship investigations in

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the social sciences (Russell, 2016; Russell et al., 2016, 2013). Perhaps these academic investigations are also spurred by gay male–straight female relationships, which are endemic in contemporary American popular culture, including television (Avila-Saavedra, 2008) and movies (Benshoff and Griffin, 2009).

In the retailing domain, Rosenbaum et al. (2015) recently put forth an “interactive family” conceptual framework that details the supportive resources that gay men and straight women often exchange in retail settings and which serve as the foundation for their working relationships in retail settings. Rosenbaum et al. draw from extant female–female competition literature to suggest that, because of stigma concerns, women prefer working with gay male associates when they are older or heavier than available female associates. Another premise of Rosenbaum et al.’s model is that, absent male–female sexual interest, female customers provide gay male associates a mandate of privacy—that is, permission to view or touch their bodies in a non-sexual but intimate manner during the sales process. However, though interesting, postulations of both inter-female competition and the mandate of privacy remain unsupported by empirical evidence.

The goal of this article is to expand the retailing discipline’s theoretical understanding of gay sales associates–(straight) female working relationships in retail settings in two ways. First, we explore female preferences for gay male to heterosexual female sales associates by uncovering how female customers respond when working with young and thin female associates in various departments within a large retail operation. We provide quantitative and descriptive evidence that shows that women often prefer purchasing apparel from gay men when they are either older or heavier than the available female sales associate. Second, we empirically demonstrate that women prefer gay to heterosexual male associates when touch is required in the selling of a product, such as cosmetics and apparel.

The theoretical and managerial implications of this research are threefold. First, we buttress Rosenbaum et al.’s (2015) conceptual work with empirical evidence. Second, we link retailing research with occupational research (Tilcsik et al., 2015) to shed further light on why gay men congregate to customer service occupations. Third, we expand the retailing discipline’s understanding of why straight female customers may desire to work with gay male sales associates in retail settings. The findings may help retail managers better maximize their organizations’ sales potential by understanding the unique role that gay sales associates may assume with female shoppers on a retail salesfloor (Peretz, 1995).

The structure of the article is as follows: first, we focus on cues that may influence female customers’ self-esteem, including age and weight, in terms of their preference for gay or heterosexual female retail associates. We find evidence that in many retail situations, women prefer working with gay to female sales associates when they feel inferior to the latter in terms of beauty and aesthetic appearance. Second, we explore differences between gay and heterosexual male retail associates by focusing on tactile sensory cues. We discuss the importance of touch in the selling of retail products and then explore the unique characteristics between gay men and straight female customers that facilitate touch in retail settings. We also put forth three hypotheses and engage in an experimental condition to test them. We conclude with a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications and research limitations.

## 2. Female preference for gay to heterosexual female retail sales associates

Popular culture employs the term “fag hag” to denote overweight or “unattractive” women who somehow fail to perpetuate the heterosexual ideal and who actively seek friendships with gay men, who also are rejected from the heterosexual mainstream (Moon, 1995). Despite the

degrading nomenclature regarding fag hag, throughout the 20th century, retailing researchers generally overlooked the possibility of social commonalities between overweight or so-called unattractive women and gay male sales associates in retailing environments.

However, Peretz (1995) finds that female customers of a high-end Parisian boutique typically sought out the boutique’s gay male associate when they were older or heavier than the store’s female employees. The boutique’s female customers seemed to prefer working with the gay male sales associate when there was a potential for their self-esteem to be stigmatized. Peretz notes that the male sales associate was “an overtly gay man” (p. 29), who wore feminine scarves with his traditional suit, thus limiting the possibility of female customers erring in their judgment of his sexual orientation. Furthermore, research reveals that women’s mood, body dissatisfaction, weight anxiety, and appearance all suffer when they see images (i.e., advertisements) of thin models, regardless of whether the image is a body part or a full body (Tiggemann and McGill, 2004; Tiggemann et al., 2009). Given that older women are often heavier than younger women, female customers may simply be uncomfortable working with younger, thinner retail sales associates in retail situations that require non-sexual but intimate contact, such as dressing in a fitting room, being measured for alterations, or being touched by the sales associate to adjust selected items.

Because customer comfort has a significant impact on satisfaction, trust, and organizational commitment (Spake et al., 2003), gay sales associates can provide older women or those unsatisfied with their figures a more comfortable shopping experience than can younger and thinner female sales associates when non-sexual but intimate contact is required during the retail transaction (see Peretz (1995)). Furthermore, given that older or heavier women may be sensitized to their appearance during the purchase of apparel items in retail settings, they may perceive the trustworthiness of gay sales associates more than that of their female counterparts. To date, retail research has not explored these assumptions beyond Peretz’s (1995) participant observation study in a Parisian boutique.

According to social psychological research, heterosexual women perceive gay men as trustworthy sources of information about dating and their romantic relationships, because gay men do not have the ulterior motive of wooing for intercourse, which women suspect from heterosexual men, or competing for the same romantic partner, which they suspect from heterosexual women (Russell, 2016; Russell et al., 2013). Whereas the traditional fag hag was characterized by an obese or unattractive female seeking solace among gay men, contemporary research reveals that attractive women often befriend gay men because of beliefs that these men will value them beyond sex and provide them with valuable advice from a male perspective (Russell et al., 2016). Thus, in retail settings, some female customers may seek out gay men “because no rivalry occurs with customers over status differences or appearance. The salesman’s ... looks are not likely to be seen as a challenge by women customers, most of whom are 20 or 30 years older and feel uneasy about admitting that they must try on an item to see whether it fits” (Peretz, 1995, p. 30).

We now turn attention to a gap in the retailing literature by addressing the following research question: Do women prefer dealing with gay male sales associates when they are older or heavier than female sales associates for purchases that require a certain level of non-sexual intimacy, such as apparel or cosmetics?

## 3. Study 1

### 3.1. Method

One of the authors conducted 25 structured interviews with female consumers who ranged in age from 20 to 71 years. All the female

**Table 1**  
Female preferences for gay or female retail sales associates<sup>a</sup>.

Age	Initial sales associate preference					Preference for younger and thinner female associates					Change
	Cosmetics	Accessories	Apparel	Shoes	Home	Cosmetics	Accessories	Apparel	Shoes	Home	
60	F	F	F	M/F	M/F	F	F	F	M/F	M/F	No
23	F	M/F	M	M/F	M/F	F	M/F	M	M/F	M/F	No
44	F	F	M	M	M	F	F	M	M	M	No
43	F	F	F	M	M/F	F	F	F	M	M/F	No
30	M	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	M	M/F	<b>M</b>	M/F	M/F	Yes
23	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	<b>M</b>	F	<b>M</b>	Yes
27	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	<b>M</b>	M/F	M/F	Yes
23	F	F	F	M	M	F	F	F	M	M	No
71	F	M	F	M	M	F	M	F	M	M	No
43	M	F	M	M	M	M	<b>M</b>	M	M	M	Yes
20	F	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	F	M/F	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	M/F	Yes
23	F	M	M	F	M	F	M	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	M	Yes
20	F	F	M	M/F	M/F	F	F	M	M/F	M/F	No
21	F	F	M	F	M	F	F	M	F	M	No
24	F	F	F	F	M	F	F	F	F	M	No
23	F	F	F	M	F	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	F	M	F	Yes
21	F	F	M	M	F	F	F	M	<b>F</b>	F	Yes
49	M/F	F	M/F	F	M/F	M/F	<b>M/F</b>	<b>M</b>	F	M/F	Yes
29	F	M	F	F	M	F	M	F	F	M	No
21	F	M/F	M	F	M/F	F	<b>M</b>	M	F	M/F	Yes
22	F	M/F	M/F	F	M/F	F	M/F	M/F	<b>M/F</b>	M/F	Yes
27	F	F	F	M/F	M/F	F	F	F	M/F	M/F	No
50	F	F	M/F	M/F	M	F	F	M/F	<b>M</b>	M	Yes
22	M	F	F	M/F	M	M	<b>M/F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	M	Yes
51	M	F	F	M	M	M	F	F	M	M	No
	M: 4	M: 3	M: 8	M: 8	M: 11	M: 5	M: 6	M: 13	M: 9	M: 12	Yes=13
	M/F: 2	M/F: 6	M/F: 6	M/F: 9	M/F: 11	M/F: 2	M/F: 6	M/F: 2	M/F: 7	M/F: 11	No=12
	F: 19	F: 16	F: 11	F: 8	F: 3	F: 18	F: 13	F: 10	F: 9	F: 2	

Notes: Bolded letters indicate a change in the response between the two questions. <sup>a</sup>F=female; M=male; M/F=male or female.

informants lived in a major midwestern suburban city, and each informant noted that she knowingly, or seemingly unexpectedly, worked with a gay male sales associate in a retail setting. It is worth noting here that the sample site is in a state that has legalized homosexual marriage and that is known for its liberal attitudes toward diverse populations. Each interview took approximately 20 min to complete. One of the authors entered 50 pages of text, from the 25 interviews, into NVivo 11.0 software for data analysis. The interview guide is available in the [Appendix](#).

### 3.2. Data results

**Table 1** shows the results regarding the informants' preferences for working with gay male sales associates or straight female associates in five departments within a retail environment and two conditions. In the first condition, the informants specified a preference for either a gay male or a straight female sales associate without any additional information. In the second condition, the informants were told that they could still choose between gay male and female sales associates; however, the female sales associates were younger and thinner than they were.

The results reveal that when given the choice to work with gay male or straight female sales associates, most the informants chose the female associate in cosmetics (19), accessories (16), and apparel (11). The informants showed equal preference for gay male and straight female associates in shoes (8, respectively). Finally, the same number of informants expressed a preference for the gay male sales associate in home décor as informants who expressed no gender preference (11, respectively). Overall, the results reveal that with the exception of home décor and shoes, most female informants do not express an initial desire to work with a gay male sales associate in a department store setting. Rather, we find a strong

preference among the informants to refrain from working with a gay male sales associate in cosmetics, accessories, and apparel. Thus, an all-male sales force could be detrimental to retailers' bottom line in certain departments.

However, the informants' preferences for a gay male to a straight female sales associate remarkably changed in certain departments when the female sales associate was younger and thinner than they were. In the first condition, only 8 informants expressed a desire to work with a gay male sales associate in apparel; however, this number increased to 13 when the female associate was younger and thinner than the informants. Similarly, only 3 informants initially expressed a desire to work with a gay male sales associate in accessories; however, this number doubled to 6 in the second condition. The other categories (i.e., cosmetics, shoes, and home décor) had marginal increases of a single informant each in the second condition.

This finding is significant in that it confirms [Peretz's \(1995\)](#) observational insights into the preferences of certain female customers for working with a gay male sales associate when they are confronted with an alternative choice of working with a younger and thinner sales associate for a clothing purchase. In the following section, we break new ground in the retailing domain by exploring female retail customers' proclivity for working with either a gay male sales associate or a female sales associate who is younger and thinner than they are.

#### 3.2.1. Gay knowledge

The informants shopping for apparel who changed their preference from a female to a gay male sales associate when confronted with a younger and more attractive female associate remarked that they believed that a gay man would be more knowledgeable in fitting a larger body type. For example, the following informant doubted the female sales associate's ability to understand a curvy body:

I would say the gay male for this one since the thinner female may not know how to fit clothing for my curvier body type. (F, age 23).

Another informant questioned the female associate's ability to select merchandise:

I would choose the gay male because the female is younger than me and I don't need a younger female's advice. I would feel that she can't pick out my clothes and give input about them because she is thinner than me. I feel like she would just say everything looks good to not hurt my feelings. The gay male would be honest with me and pick the right things. (F, age 22).

Finally, an informant who switched from a female to a gay male sales associate for an accessories purchase questioned her ability to learn from the saleswoman:

I would choose the gay male because I can learn from him and he can learn from me. It's all the factor of how the female looks which makes me not want to choose her. The gay male would show me how to select accessories to make me pretty, but a younger of thinner female does not understand this. (F, age 23).

### 3.2.2. Judgment-free zone

Another reason female informants expressed a preference for gay male sales associates in apparel stems from a concern about being negatively judged by the younger and thinner female associate. One informant who switched from having no sales associate preference in apparel to preferring a gay sales associate said:

I would be fine with a gay male helping me in the fitting room. I come from an environment where my two closest friends are gay so I am comfortable with that type of scenario. The female sales associate may stare at my body and judge me. The gay salesmen would go out of his way to make me feel comfortable about my body. (F, age 30).

Another informant grappled with this complex preference decision:

I'm tempted to probably go directly to the gay male because of the intimidation aspect of the female. I gauge people to be all younger, thinner, and prettier than me. If they were both standing in front of me, it would be hard for me to pick one over the other. I would tend to think that the gay male [sales associate] would be more forgiving and less judgmental [than the female sales associate] in apparel. I wouldn't be able to relate as well to the female. Gay males are usually judgeless and worry about making you feel good. (F, age 27).

Still another informant mentioned female–female competition among strangers in retail stores. The informant reasoned that she would prefer a gay male sales associate to a younger and thinner female associate, as follows:

From an emotional side, going to a gay guy [sales associate] would be easier if you are more self-conscious. You won't want to feel that competition with the female that is more attractive and younger and prettier than you. You might not feel pretty if she could look better in the dress than you. I wouldn't have that issue with the gay guy. (F, age 49).

### 3.3. Discussion

Overall, Study 1 provides original and theoretically rich insights into why certain female customers prefer working with gay male sales

associates in retail settings. Indeed, many older and heavier women seem to trust the advice of gay male sales associates, more so than their female counterparts, because of beliefs that gay associates would be more socially perceptive of the fashions that are appropriate for them. That is, many older and heavier female customers rely on gay male sales associates to determine how their apparel and accessory options might yield positive responses from others, such as spouses or co-workers. Thus, the social perceptiveness skill that gay men have developed as a “survival” technique (Tilcsik et al., 2015) is coveted by many female customers in retail settings. Furthermore, the lack of female–female competition permits many older and heavier women to simply feel comfortable with gay men and to trust their advice (Russell et al., 2016). We now turn attention to exploring situations when female customers prefer working with gay male associates to their heterosexual male counterparts.

## 4. Female preferences for gay male sales associates to heterosexual male counterparts

### 4.1. Power of touch in consumer behavior

Service encounters are frequently dyadic interactions consisting of interpersonal social exchanges between employees and customers, during which both parties engage in verbal and non-verbal communication, including touch (Gabbott and Hogg, 2001). Marketing researchers overwhelmingly conclude that touch plays a significant role in shaping consumer behavior (Peck and Shu, 2009), as consumer use their hands and, thus, tactile sensory cues to connect with packaged goods (Grohmann et al., 2007), durable brands (McCabe and Nowlis, 2003), impulse items (Peck and Childers, 2006), museum displays (Peck and Wiggins, 2006), and even service personnel, such as food servers (Lynn et al., 1998), during service encounters.

Hornik (1992) concludes that interpersonal, casual touch during service exchanges, primarily food-related exchanges, contributes to customers' positive regard for the server, as touch connotes meaning such as closeness, warmth, empathy (i.e., being cared for), connection, and affection, all of which serve to increase customer comfort (Spake et al., 2003). Indeed, most retailing and service researchers have found that a “slight” touch from a retail clerk or restaurant employee results in favorable customer responses, including a propensity to purchase, increased spending, and provision of larger tips (Guéguen and Jacob, 2005; Jacob et al., 2011). However, a slight touch differs from more intricate touch that often transpires in luxury retail settings, especially during apparel alterations (Peretz, 1995).

Furthermore, Hornik (1992) suggests that gender differences exist in reaction to touch, as women are slightly more likely than men to respond favorably to touch during service exchanges; that is, women have an innate tendency to seek more affection, warmth, and interpersonal intimacy in their social relationships. Research clarifies that women do not readily seek out tactile stimulation from all men in retail stores; rather, they react negatively when they are touched by male strangers in retail settings, as some view it as a personal violation (Martin, 2012). Therefore, women must willingly accept interpersonal touch during retail transactions to have positive shopping experiences. An important question then is whether women prefer being touched during the sales process in a retail store by a heterosexual or homosexual male sales associate. We turn attention to answering this question.

### 4.2. Mandate of privacy

In some service situations, women must permit professional male service providers to proceed with the required task of their jobs by granting them temporary and contextually bounded access to intimate parts of their bodies (Rosenbaum et al., 2015). Hughes (1958) conceptualizes this permission as a mandate of privacy. For example,

during a physical examination (Henslin and Biggs, 1971), the female patient provides the male doctor with a mandate of privacy that permits him to conduct the necessary intimate tests. Likewise, Peretz (1995) shows that female customers who worked with overtly gay male sales associates in a high-end Parisian luxury boutique granted them a mandate of privacy, which permitted them to view their female customers partially unclothed in a fitting room or to touch their bodies for apparel fit and alterations.

Given the lack of sexual interest between gay men and heterosexual women, Rosenbaum et al. (2015) argue that gay male sales associates receive a mandate of privacy from their straight female customers, which permits them to view and touch their bodies during transactions. If this is indeed the case, heterosexual female customers should express a stronger favorable response to working with gay male sales associates than their straight male counterparts when purchasing. For example, sales associates and customers often engage in intimate touching during retail encounters, especially in the selling of cosmetics and apparel (Orth et al., 2013).

Thus, we propose that female customers will express greater comfort (Spake et al., 2003) and a greater willingness to work with a gay male sales associate than a heterosexual male sales associate when purchasing cosmetics and apparel. For product categories that do not require female customers to extend a mandate of privacy, such as luggage, we posit that they will be indifferent to working with either a gay or a heterosexual male sales associate. Thus:

**H1.** Female customers will express (a) a significantly higher comfort level and (b) a greater willingness to work with a gay male sales associate than a heterosexual male sales associate when purchasing cosmetics.

**H2.** Female customers will express (a) a significantly higher comfort level and (b) a greater willingness to work with a gay male sales associate than a heterosexual male sales associate when purchasing apparel.

**H3.** Female customers will express (a) the same comfort level and (b) the same willingness to work with a gay male sales associate as a heterosexual male sales associate when purchasing luggage.

## 5. Study 2

### 5.1. Method

#### 5.1.1. Participants

One hundred eighty-three heterosexual women ( $M_{age}=19.78$ ,  $SD_{age}=3.66$ , age range: 17–52 years) took part in this study. Participants were recruited from the subject pool of a large public university in the United States, and they received partial course credit for their participation. The sample was 33% Caucasian, 24% Hispanic, 18% African American, 20% Asian, and 5% other. To take part in the study, the female participants had to self-identify as being heterosexual.

#### 5.1.2. Scenarios

We generated two scenarios that represented a service exchange situation in which women entered a retail store to make a purchase in three specific departments (cosmetics, apparel, and luggage); they were then asked to imagine seeing a male sales associate working in that department. We created the first scenario such that the female informant was not aware of the male sales associate's sexual orientation. For example, the first scenario read: "Consider for a moment that you are planning to purchase [cosmetics vs. a dress vs. a piece of luggage] at a store, and you see a male sales associate working in the department who could assist you." The second scenario provided evidence of the sales associate's sexual orientation. For example, the second scenario read: "Imagine that after you enter the [cosmetics department vs. dress department vs. luggage department] you get a sense that the male sales associate is [gay vs.

straight] from his mannerisms and style of clothes." (We provide a detailed explanation on discerning sexual orientation in the "Discussion" section).

### 5.2. Procedure

Participants completed the experiment online, which was run using Qualtrics survey software. After participants logged in to complete the experiment, they were informed that they were taking part in a study examining their perceptions of retail environments. After giving their consent, the participants were randomly assigned to one of the three retailing conditions: cosmetics department, apparel department, or luggage department.

Participants were instructed to imagine that they needed to purchase an item in their specific department (some cosmetics vs. a dress vs. a piece of luggage). Then, they were presented with the first scenario that asked them to imagine seeing a male sales associate who could assist them with their purchase. Next, participants were presented with the second scenario that asked them to imagine learning the sexual orientation of the sales associate. Each participant viewed and evaluated scenarios in which they interacted with a gay male sales associate and a straight male sales associate. In each scenario, participants indicated (1) how comfortable they would be with the sales associate (measured on a 10-point Likert-type scale, from 1=very uncomfortable to 10=very comfortable) and (2) how willing they would be to work with the sales associate (measured on a 10-point Likert-type scale, from 1=very unwilling to 10=very willing).

### 5.3. Results

The overall design of the experiment was a 3 (store department: cosmetics vs. dress vs. luggage, between-subjects) × 2 (sexual orientation awareness: unaware vs. aware, within-subject) × 2 (sales associate

**Table 2**

Means (standard deviations) of female comfort and willingness to work with male employees.

Scenario	Department	Mean (SD) Unaware	Mean (SD) Aware	N
Comfort working with male employee				
Gay male employee	Cosmetics	8.18 (2.19)	8.60 (2.00)	62
	Apparel	7.54 (2.28)	8.54 (1.83)	57
	Luggage	8.53 (1.84)	8.77 (1.81)	64
	Total	8.10 (2.13)	8.64 (1.88)	183
Straight male employee				
Straight male employee	Cosmetics	8.03 (2.27)	8.03 (2.14)	62
	Apparel	7.67 (2.28)	7.23 (2.46)	57
	Luggage	8.64 (1.67)	8.56 (1.80)	64
	Total	8.13 (2.11)	7.97 (2.19)	183
Willingness to work with male employee				
Gay male employee	Cosmetics	7.77 (2.24)	8.79 (1.87)	62
	Apparel	7.98 (2.32)	8.74 (1.82)	57
	Luggage	8.00 (2.36)	8.70 (1.86)	64
	Total	7.92 (2.29)	8.74 (1.84)	183
Straight male employee				
Straight male employee	Cosmetics	8.05 (2.13)	8.11 (1.84)	62
	Apparel	8.21 (2.03)	7.74 (2.20)	57
	Luggage	8.11 (2.20)	8.67 (1.88)	64
	Total	8.12 (2.12)	8.19 (2.00)	183

Notes: Scenario responses are measured on a 10-point Likert-type scale, in terms of how comfortable they would be with the sales associate (1=very uncomfortable, 10=very comfortable) and how willing participants would be to work with the sales associate (1=very unlikely, 10=very likely).

orientation: gay vs. straight, within-subject) mixed factorial design. Thus, we performed a mixed-model multivariate analysis of variance to examine whether women's (1) comfort level with the sales associate and (2) willingness to work with the male sales associate varied as a function of store department, the sales associate's sexual orientation, and their awareness of his sexual orientation. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the results of the experimental design conditions.

The results revealed a multivariate, three-way interaction among the store department, the sales associate's sexual orientation, and the participant's awareness of his sexual orientation ( $\Lambda=.95$ , mult.  $F(2, 180)=4.79$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.05$ ). This three-way interaction was evident for women's comfort level with the associate ( $F(2, 180)=4.66$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.05$ ) and their willingness to work with the associate ( $F(2, 180)=4.45$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.05$ ). To test our specific predictions, we examined the differences within each retail department condition.

Across all three departments, when women were not aware of the male sales associates' sexual orientations (gay or straight), we found no significant differences in their comfort level or willingness to work with the associate (all  $p > .12$ ). However, when women were made aware of each sales associate's sexual orientation, they were significantly more likely to feel comfortable with the gay male sales associate than the

straight male sales associate in both the cosmetics department ( $F(1, 180)=5.99$ ,  $p=.02$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.03$ ) and the dress department ( $F(1, 180)=29.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.14$ ). They were also significantly more willing to work with the gay sales associate than the straight male associate in both the cosmetics department ( $F(1, 180)=9.46$ ,  $p=.002$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.05$ ) and the dress department ( $F(1, 180)=18.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.10$ ). Thus, H1a, H1b, H2a, and H2b are supported.

Conversely, we found no difference in women's comfort level with the gay or straight sales associates when buying luggage ( $p=.37$ ) or their willingness to work with them in this department ( $p=.89$ ). Thus, H3a and H3b are supported. In retail settings in which female customers do not need to provide men with a mandate of privacy, their attitudes toward working with gay or heterosexual male associates do not significantly differ in terms of comfort and willingness to work with them. Fig. 1 provides an illustration of the means and standard deviations for the experimental design conditions.

5.4. Discussion

The experimental condition in this study was based on a stimulus in which female participants learned of the male sales associate's sexual orientation. Regarding how women learn to evaluate a focal man's

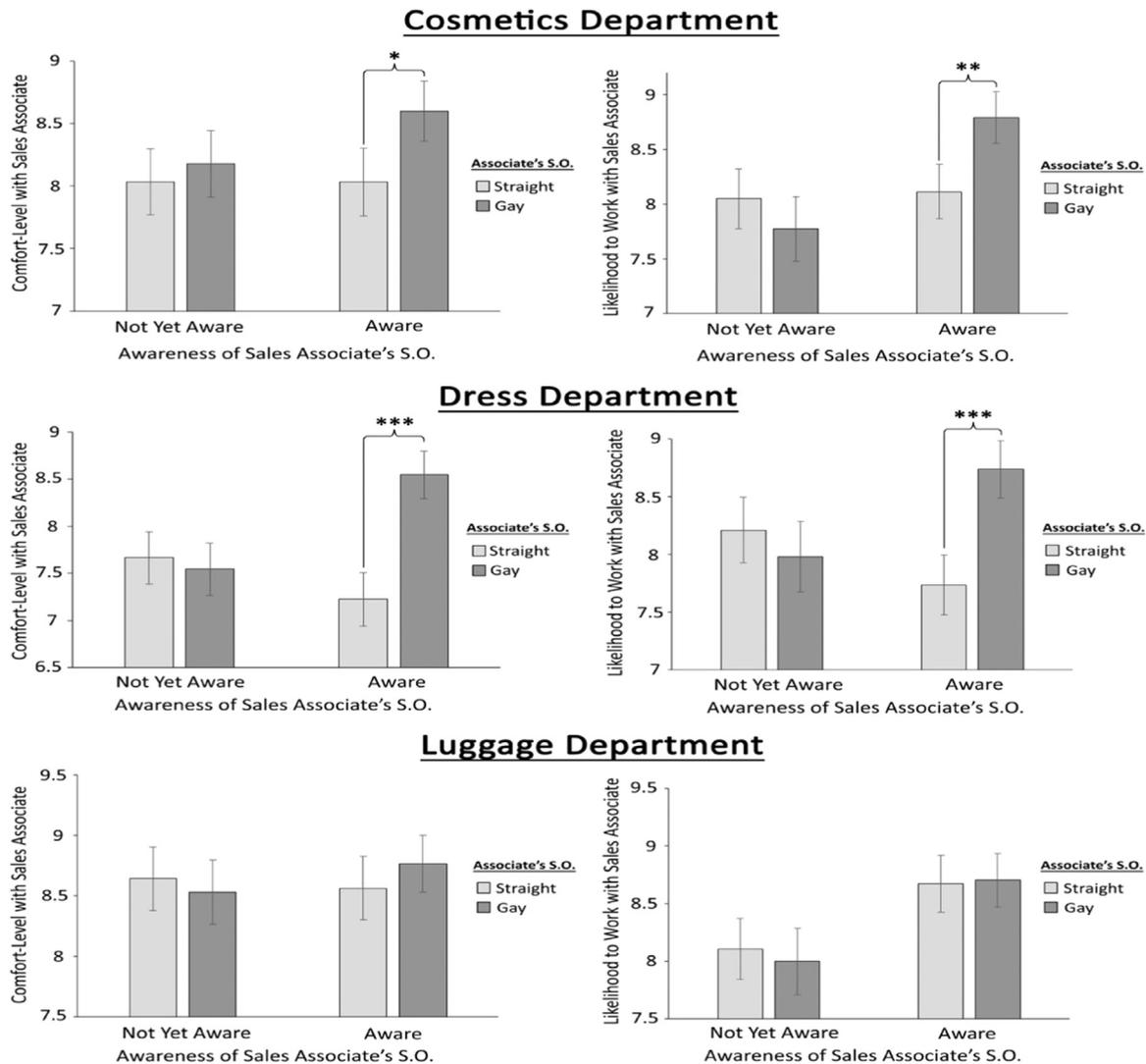


Fig. 1. Female comfort and likelihood to work with gay and heterosexual male employees. Note: S.O.=sexual orientation. Full scale runs from 1 to 10. Bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

sexual orientation, research studies show the existence of gaydar—that is, a person's ability to glean others' sexual orientation from mere observation (Tabak and Zayas, 2012). In experimental conditions, Tabak and Zayas (2012) find that women can correctly identify the sexual orientation of a man from briefly looking (for 50 ms) at a photograph. Other researchers suggest that gaydar is simply analogous to a form of stereotyping in which people judge sexual orientation not only on facial characteristics but also on body language and occupational cues (Cox et al., 2016). For example, women who work with gay men in retail settings often remark that they decipher sexual orientation by mannerisms, body language (e.g., walking style), and vocal cues (Lawson, 1999).

However, researchers also confirm that guessing a man's sexual orientation using gaydar or analyzing stereotypical cues is not without error, and in many situations women incorrectly judge a man's sexual orientation when using cues such as facial characteristics or occupational status (Cox et al., 2016; Tabak and Zayas, 2012). Regardless, we find that when women are confident in a male sales associate's sexual orientation, they display a greater comfort level and a greater willingness to work with him than with a heterosexual male sales associate in retail transactions necessitating the provision of a mandate of privacy.

## 6. Conclusion

The goal of this article was to investigate female preferences for gay male sales associates in retail settings. To date, retail researchers active in both the commercial friendship and relationship marketing paradigms have tended to overlook female–gay male commercial relationships, even though research highlights the friendship bonds that often form between them (Russell et al., 2013). Rosenbaum et al. (2015) recently countered this trend by putting forth a conceptual model that explains why commercial friendships form between female customers and gay male sales associates in retail settings. This research builds on that study by offering groundbreaking empirical and humanistic evidence of why female shoppers often prefer working with gay male sales associates to their heterosexual male and female counterparts.

Study 1 reveals humanistic and empirical evidence of a provocative occurrence in retail settings—namely, how female shoppers respond to working with younger and thinner female associates. Although Peretz (1995) notes that older female shoppers at a luxury boutique often waited to work with the boutique's gay male associate, he did not provide reasons for this request. The current research shows that women's preference for gay male sales associates stems from their beliefs that gay male associates will understand how to improve their curvy figures more than female associates. In other words, many female shoppers assume that young and thin female associates lack the acumen to recommend fashionable clothing and accessories to older and heavier female customers. From an occupational skill perspective, older or heavier female customers believe that gay men are attuned to understanding social perceptiveness (Tilcsik et al., 2015), which allows them to judge their female clients from multiple outsiders' perspectives, such as male spouses or co-workers.

This finding is further buttressed by female–female competition and the belief among older and heavier female shoppers that they will be negatively judged by younger and thinner female associates. Note that female informants did not show an initial proclivity for working with gay male sales associates in a store's apparel department until they were told that the female associates were younger

and thinner than they were. We encourage researchers to expand on this finding in the future by exploring whether female shoppers would also choose to work more with heterosexual male than younger and thinner female sales associates. Retail researchers could also investigate whether female–female competition exists in stores and whether its presence spurs some shoppers to purchase merchandise online.

Study 2 offers empirical evidence supporting Hughes's (1958) classic notion of a mandate of privacy, in which a woman grants permission to a male service provider to touch her in a non-sexual but intimate manner during a service encounter. In a series of experiments, female participants felt more comfortable and were more willing to work with a gay male sales associate in both cosmetics and apparel than they were with a heterosexual male sales associate. Yet, when female shoppers sought assistance with luggage (in which a mandate of privacy did not exist), they felt comfortable and were equally willing to work with heterosexual or gay male sales associates. Overall, these findings contribute to the touch paradigm in retailing and services (Guéguen and Jacob, 2005; Jacob et al., 2011) by showing that female response differs between slight and somewhat more intimate male employee touching.

We encourage retail researchers to expand on these findings by exploring whether heterosexual men provide a mandate of privacy to female and gay male sales associates in a retail setting. For example, when faced with the choice of working with heterosexual or gay male sales associates in high-touch departments (e.g., the purchasing of a suit), heterosexual male shoppers may refrain from or experience discomfort with working with a gay male sales associate. However, there is a dearth of knowledge about whether heterosexual male shoppers maintain commercial friendships with gay male sales associates.

Retail managers, especially those who oversee luxury and specialty stores, should realize the strategic role of gay male sales associates in the selling of apparel to large segments of the female population. Indeed, as global populations age, many female shoppers will find themselves faced with having to work with younger or thinner female sales associates. Perhaps this is why many female shoppers are turning to e-commerce for their apparel purchases; they are simply uncomfortable working with young and thin female sales associates. We realize that this statement may be contentious; however, female–female competition is an actual phenomenon in human nature (Stockley and Campbell, 2013).

One limitation of this research is that it took place in a location that has legalized gay marriage and in which the gay population is large. Although this research generalizes to many Western nations and international cities that embrace diversity, it likely does not apply to locations in which homosexuals are a stigmatized and persecuted minority. In addition, because the experiments in Study 2 took place on a large university campus, it is likely that the participants were biased in favor of or had some degree of comfort with homosexuals. We encourage retail researchers to explore gay–straight relationships from a cross-cultural perspective as pioneering opportunities exist in the development of this emerging paradigm. Furthermore, although the Human Rights Campaign (2017) and the popular press (Bolcer, 2012) discuss the prevalence of LGBT employed in retail industries, the precise number of gay male sales associates employed by retail organizations remains unknown. Despite these research limitations, this work contributes to a pioneering retailing paradigm, namely, understanding the intricate working relationships between straight female shoppers and gay male sales associates in retail settings.

## Appendix A. Interview guide

1. Tell me about the last time that you worked with a male sales associate in a retail store that you firmly knew, or highly suspected, was gay.
2. How did you know that the male sales associate was gay?
3. How did the gay male sales associate make you feel?
4. Let's assume that in each department of a major retail store you have the choice to work with either a gay male sales associate or a female sales associate. Please tell me your preference in each department and explain why this is so.
  - Cosmetics
  - Accessories
  - Apparel
  - Shoes
  - Home décor
5. Let's assume again that in each department of a major retail store you have the choice to work with either a gay male sales associate or a female sales associate who is younger and thinner than you are. Please tell me your preference in each department and explain why this is so.
  - Cosmetics
  - Accessories
  - Apparel
  - Shoes
  - Home décor

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