

Just a Friend or Something More: Understanding the Complexity of Opposite-Sex Friendships

Dwi Hardani Oktawirawan¹ and Bertha Kristiyanti²

^{1,2}Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: oktawirawan@live.undip.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Friendship is a social relationship that is established between individuals of the same or opposite sex. Opposite-sex friendships in adults certainly reap complexity, both from within the person who makes the friendship and from others. This study aims to understand the complexity of opposite-sex friendships in adults through a literature review of research articles in Scopus-indexed journals on opposite-sex friendships. The results show that the decision to make opposite-sex friendships is influenced by various factors, such as physical attractiveness, personal values, cultural norms, hormonal influences, homophobia, and relationship status. Additionally, there is a tendency to perceive these friendships as romantic relationships. In many cases, this assumption is true because opposite-sex friendships can also lead to more intimate relationships such as friendships with benefits or romantic relationships. Opposite-sex friendships with people who already have partners can also result in jealousy, infidelity, and even breakups. In addition, different perspectives of men and women regarding opposite-sex friendships are discussed, including those related to physical contact in these friendships. In summary, friendships between men and women are complicated. They are affected by many factors and may be seen differently by men and women.

Keywords: Friendship Psychology, Interpersonal Dynamics, Male-Female Friendships, Platonic Relationships.

1. INTRODUCTION

Friendship is the relationship between two people, in which each party values the other and successfully communicates this fact to the other (Rodríguez-Cárdenas, 2021). Individuals can simultaneously form friendships with several friends at the same time. Individuals in friendship relationships can also be involved in other social relationships simultaneously, such as siblings. Friendships are valuable and important elements of life (Leibowitz, 2018).

Friendships are seen as positive affective relationships in which homogeneity in terms of gender and age is essential for their formation (Rodríguez-Cárdenas, 2021). Men and women across a wide age range share the same cultural norms for close relationships, norms of trust, commitment, and respect. However, when it comes to friendships, women often have higher expectations of friends than men and place more emphasis on intimacy (Felmlee & Muraco, 2009). Individuals with same-sex friendship preferences have a noticeable influence on friendship quality. Those who favor same-sex friendships provide consistent ratings on several aspects. Men and women feel closer, more trusting, and have more common interests in same-sex friendships. In addition, women felt that same-sex friendships were more supportive and caring than were men. Men feel that same-sex friendships are more fun and relaxed (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009).

Opposite-sex friendships are seen as ambiguous relationships because they present challenges to the individuals involved, as they try to understand and define their roles as friends (O'Meara, 1989). For adolescents, opposite-sex friendships can serve as a venue for fostering

romantic relationships (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2008). In opposite-sex friendships among adults, men tend to choose based on physical attraction, while women choose male friends who can provide physical protection and economic resources. These preferences show similarities in mate selection. Individuals who already have partners are less likely to view their opposite-sex friends as potential partners. However, if individuals are not satisfied with their relationships, they may view their opposite-sex friends as potential partners either consciously or unconsciously (Lewis et al., 2011). For older adults, the type of job and work environment can influence how comfortable they are in discussing sensitive topics in friendships. Individuals working in predominantly opposite-sex environments tend to be more open to discussing sensitive topics with opposite-sex colleagues. However, not all of them react positively, while opposite-sex colleagues give negative reactions, so men sometimes use humor as a strategy to hide embarrassment (Hinchliff et al., 2021).

Various studies have suggested that friendships with the opposite sex are highly correlated with happiness (Proscal et al., 2015). Individuals who prefer close friendships with the opposite sex have many in common with their opposite-sex friends. Men tend to prefer to engage with female friends in conversations. Women find male friends more fun and relaxed than do female friends (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009). However, opposite-sex friendships do not always have a positive impact. This is because common beliefs have a major influence on opposite-sex friendships. Opposite-sex friendships can threaten individuals in romantic relationships. The emergence of suspicion towards opposite-sex friendships can be a source of conflict in romantic relationships (McCubbery, 2006).

Sexual attraction poses a challenge in opposite-sex friendships (Halatsis & Christakis, 2009). Opposite-sex friendships can also threaten individuals in romantic relationships. The suspicion of opposite-sex friendships can be a source of conflict in romantic relationships (McCubbery, 2006). Many people worry that friendly behavior in opposite-sex friendships can be misinterpreted as a sexual attraction. They also fear that misunderstandings arising from friendly jokes and conversation topics with opposite-sex friends could be perceived as sexual harassment (Elsesser & Plepau, 2006). The complexity that occurs in opposite-sex friendships is an important issue to be studied in depth.

The existence of limitations in understanding and strong social stigma against opposite-sex friendships can hinder the formation of healthy and meaningful relationships between adults. This study aims to understand the complexity of adult opposite-sex friendships through a literature review of research articles in Scopus indexed journals on opposite-sex friendships. This study is expected to provide information on preferences in opposite-sex friendships and how to view opposite-sex friendships and their maintenance in relationships.

2. METHODS

This study is a literature review (Snyder, 2019) involving secondary data in the form of research articles on opposite-sex friendships. The articles reviewed in this study were published in Scopus-indexed journals within the last ten years. The inclusion criterion used in this review was primary empirical research that addressed opposite-sex friendships from a psychological perspective. The selection of these criteria aims to specify search results that focus on studies of human behavior related to opposite-sex friendship. The exclusion criteria were review

articles and articles that discussed relationships between men and women other than friendships, such as romantic partnerships.

The article search was conducted on October 4, 2024, using the keywords (“opposite-sex” OR “opposite sex” OR “cross-sex” OR “cross sex” OR “differen*-sex” OR “differen* sex” OR “differen* sex”) AND friend*. The search filters used included the year of publication of the article, which is within the last ten years, English language, a journal article, and research in the field of psychology. Subsequently, the articles obtained were screened by both authors based on the title, abstract, and full paper to ensure compliance with the inclusion criteria. The articles that passed the screening were then analyzed in accordance with the research objectives, namely related to influencing factors, impacts that can occur, and views from various parties about the relationship.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

An initial search of the Scopus database using predetermined keywords yielded 124 articles. Filtering the search results based on the year of publication and language yielded 33 articles. Filters based on the document type, source type, and subject area yielded 22 articles. Articles that passed the filter stage were then reviewed by the two authors based on the title, abstract, and full paper, and 16 articles were selected based on the inclusion criteria. The 16 articles were then analyzed by the two authors in accordance with the research objectives.

3.1. Factors Related to Opposite-Sex Friendships

The formation of opposite-sex friendships is influenced by various things, both related to internal individual factors and external factors. One of the factors that makes someone involved in an opposite-sex friendship is fear of crime. Research conducted by Meskelyte and Lyons (2022) shows that people who feel afraid of crime prefer to have friends who appear strong and can protect them. Women who are afraid of becoming victims of crime tend to choose male friends, especially those who look strong (Meskelyte & Lyons, 2022). This suggests that opposite-sex friendships forged by women may be influenced by the need for friends who are considered strong and can protect them from crime, which in this case is projected on male friends.

Other factors that can make a person avoid involvement in opposite-sex friendships are physical attraction and homophobia (Altmann, 2021). A person who has high physical attraction to the opposite sex will avoid involvement in opposite-sex friendships (Altmann, 2021). This physical attraction may make a person more interested in a sexual or romantic relationship than friendship. In addition, homophobia also makes people avoid opposite-sex friendships (Altmann, 2021; Altmann & Roth, 2020). Friendships with people of the opposite sex may lead to assumptions related to sexual orientation. For example, men will be considered feminine if they are too familiar with female friends.

Culture also influences one's decision to engage in opposite-sex friendships. The existence of high traditional norms in certain cultures makes people avoid opposite-sex friendships and prefer to engage in same-sex friendships (Altmann, 2021, 2022). The higher the level of cultural strictness in a community, the more one will avoid opposite-sex friendships

(Altmann & Roth, 2020). This condition may occur because there may be values or norms in a particular community that do not approve interpersonal interactions between men and women who are not partners. A person eventually chooses to avoid opposite-sex friendships as a form of conformity (Altmann, 2022).

Biological factors also play a role in the formation of opposite-sex friendships. Research conducted by Altmann and Roth (2018) on 2D:4D ratio revealed the role of hormones in opposite-sex friendships. The 2D:4D ratio is a comparison between the index and ring fingers, which indicates prenatal testosterone exposure. People with a low 2D:4D ratio, which means they have high prenatal testosterone exposure, are more likely to engage in opposite-sex friendships, which is the case for both men and women (Altmann & Roth, 2018). This suggests that friendship preferences are also influenced by prenatal hormones; the more male-typed a person is, the more likely they are to engage in opposite-sex friendships.

Another consideration in a person's decision to engage in opposite-sex friendships is their romantic relationship status. Romantic partner status influences one's decision to engage in opposite-sex friendships, especially for women (Altmann, 2021, 2022). A person who does not currently have a romantic partner is usually more likely to engage in opposite-sex friendships. By contrast, people who already have a romantic partner tend to avoid engaging in opposite-sex friendships to maintain their romantic relationships.

Based on these findings, it is known that opposite-sex friendships can be influenced by several factors that result from interactions between psychological needs (sense of security, attraction), social factors (culture, traditional norms, homophobia), biological factors (prenatal hormones), and relational considerations (romantic status). These factors are interrelated, so they can either strengthen or weaken opposite-sex friendships.

3.2. Impacts Related to Opposite-Sex Friendships

Friendships with opposite-sex individuals are associated with various possible impacts. One commonly discussed issue is the relationship problems of people who already have partners. Opposite-sex friendships can cause jealousy in people who already have a romantic partner (Gilchrist-Petty & Bennett, 2019). A person feels threatened when their partner has an opposite-sex friendship. It is feared that the partner's closeness to an opposite-sex friend could reduce their closeness to their romantic partner. Couples facing this condition can produce various responses. Some choose harsh methods with the aim of keeping their partner away from their opposite-sex friend, while others actually establish tactical communication so that friendship is maintained without damaging the romantic relationship (Gilchrist-Petty & Bennett, 2019).

The risk of breaking up romantic relationships due to opposite-sex friendships can in fact, happen. This was proven by Yang et al. (2023) research on need fulfillment in the context of opposite-sex friendships. Someone who feels that their various needs can be met by an opposite-sex friend is more likely to consider breaking up with their boyfriend or girlfriend. This relationship is mediated by love commitment to a partner. The lower the commitment, the greater the potential to consider breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Need fulfillment obtained from a romantic partner also stops this condition. If someone feels that their romantic

partner has been able to fulfill their needs, the consideration of breaking up will also be smaller (Yang et al., 2023).

For people who do not have a romantic partner, opposite-sex friendships may be perceived as an opportunity to find a partner. Some people may expect sexual or romantic escalation in their opposite-sex friendships (Akbulut & Weger, 2015). This escalation refers to the desire to increase the status of the relationship from platonic friendship to FWB (friend with benefits) or romantic relationship. The desire to escalate is influenced by various factors, such as the physical attractiveness of friends, quality of friendship, and anticipation of benefits (Akbulut & Weger, 2015). Specifically, sexual permissiveness affects sexual escalation and social disapproval affects romantic escalation (Akbulut & Weger, 2015). People who have plans for escalation end up having higher relationship maintenance efforts because of long-term goals related to their opposite-sex friendship (Weger et al., 2018).

A person who has romantic or sexual desires with an opposite-sex friend usually believes that their friend is also interested, although this is not necessarily true (Lemay & Wolf, 2016b). When someone thinks their friend is interested in them, they will display romantic approach behaviors such as flirting, improving their appearance, and even expressing their romantic or sexual interest directly (Lemay & Wolf, 2016b). These behaviors also have an impact on their friends. The friends of the perpetrator may actually be provoked to bring up the attraction projected by the perpetrator as a result of the perpetrator's behavior. This condition is further strengthened if the friend considers that the perpetrator has a high "mate value" (Lemay & Wolf, 2016b).

The desire for romantic escalation targets not only single friends but also friends who already have romantic partners. This condition is called "mate poaching," where someone targets a friend who already has a partner (Lemay & Wolf, 2016a). Men perform more mate poaching than women do. This effort can also influence the attraction of the target to the mate poacher. When poachers are perceived as more attractive, their potential for decreased commitment to a romantic partner increases (Lemay & Wolf, 2016a). These effects can occur over time, even if the target has never previously experienced any feelings towards the poacher.

Opposite-sex friendships are difficult to be considered emotionally or socially neutral relationships. These friendships can either strengthen or threaten existing romantic relationships. This is because there is always the possibility of escalating from friendship to romance. The potential for escalation can have serious implications for commitment in existing romantic relationships.

3.3. Perspectives and Attitudes Related to Opposite-Sex Friendships

There are various views on opposite-sex friendships. Men who have opposite-sex friendships usually consider their friends as people who will be pursued for further relationships if the opportunity arises (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2016). Whereas women consider opposite-sex friendships as they are, namely, as friends. Both men and women still believe that there are opposite-sex friendships that are platonic friendships without romantic attraction

(Hart et al., 2015). It has also been assumed that 63% of people in opposite-sex friendships are secretly sexually attracted to their friends (Hart et al., 2015).

Sexual attraction to opposite-sex friends is more common among males (Szymkow & Frankowska, 2022). This sexual attraction is also influenced by the physical attractiveness of a friend. In women, attraction is also influenced by the condition of their relationship with their romantic partner, such as their partner's attractiveness and satisfaction with their romantic relationship (Szymkow & Frankowska, 2022). If the romantic partner is considered good, sexual attraction to the friend will be low, even though the friend is attractive (Szymkow & Frankowska, 2022). This suggests that sexual attraction to opposite-sex friends is not solely due to high attractiveness but also depends on the condition of the ongoing romantic relationship.

Opposite-sex friendships usually involve physical interaction. Men and women have different attitudes towards physical touch in opposite-sex friendships. Men usually tend to be more comfortable and open to various forms of touch regardless of the level of intimacy of the relationship (Miller et al., 2014). In contrast, women are usually only positive about touch if their friendships are emotionally close enough. Women are also more cautious about touch in public spaces and tend to reject the care touch from opposite-sex friends if they do not have a romantic partner (Miller et al., 2014). This is because of the fear that the friendship will develop in a more intimate direction. Meanwhile, romantic relationship status does not affect men's attitudes towards touching opposite-sex friends (Miller et al., 2014).

In opposite-sex friendships, there is often a situation called audience challenge, which occurs when other people, such as family, friends, or partners, think that two people who are just friends are actually in a romantic relationship (Schoonover & McEwan, 2014). This misconception is most common in opposite-sex friendships where both are attracted to each other (Schoonover & McEwan, 2014). Although the frequency is not very high, many people still worry about misunderstanding, especially if their friendships are very intense or have little social support from the surrounding environment. Interestingly, this concern tends to be lower in individuals who already have a romantic partner, as they feel more secure and confident in maintaining friendship boundaries (Schoonover & McEwan, 2014).

The difference in perceptions between men and women in forming opposite-sex friendships indicates differences in motivation and expectations in forming friendships. Opposite-sex friendships are viewed as relationships that exist between personal and social spheres, where interpretations from the surrounding environment can influence the internal dynamics of the relationship itself. Understanding opposite-sex friendships requires an approach that encompasses cognitive (perception and projection), affective (attraction and feelings), social (support or external judgment), and relational (status and commitment) dimensions. This is also one reason why opposite-sex friendships appear ambiguous and prone to misinterpretation, even though they can fundamentally be conducted in a proper manner.

4. CONCLUSION

Opposite-sex friendships form and develop in relation to a variety of factors, ranging from physical attraction, culture, personal values, romantic relationship status, to biological

factors such as prenatal hormones. These friendships are not free from potential impacts on romantic relationships, such as partner jealousy, possible breakups, and opportunities for romantic or sexual escalation. Perceptions of opposite-sex friendships also vary, with men tending to view them as opportunities for further relationships, whereas women more often view them in platonic terms. In addition, the physical interactions in these friendships also led to differences in attitudes based on gender and romantic relationship status. Moreover, social perceptions such as audience challenges show that the surrounding environment also influences the dynamics of opposite-sex friendships. Thus, opposite-sex friendships are complex relationships that are simultaneously influenced by intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors.

This research is inseparable from various limitations and thus needs to be improved through subsequent research. Data sources limited to the Scopus database narrow the scope of the review and may ignore other studies that have been published but not indexed by Scopus. In addition, this review is also limited to articles in the field of psychology, so there is still an opportunity for a more comprehensive discussion by analyzing the results of research on opposite-sex friendships from the perspective of other fields of science.

REFERENCES

- Akbulut, V., & Weger, H. (2015). Predicting responses to bids for sexual and romantic escalation in cross-sex friendships. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 156(1), 98–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2015.1066296>
- Altmann, T. (2021). Avoiding cross-sex friendships: The separability of people with and without cross-sex friends. *Current Psychology*, 42(12), 10107–10114. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02315-0>
- Altmann, T. (2022). Sex differences partially moderate the relationships between personal values and the preference for cross-sex friendships (heterosociality). *Journal of Individual Differences*, 43(3), 136–142. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1614-0001/a000367>
- Altmann, T., & Roth, M. (2018). 2D:4D digit ratio and its relations to cross-sex and same-sex friendship choices. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 134, 278–282. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.06.034>
- Altmann, T., & Roth, M. (2020). Individual differences in the preference for cross-sex friendship (heterosociality) in relation to personality. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 157, 109838. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.109838>
- Baumgarte, R., & Nelson, D. W. (2009). Preference for same- versus cross-sex friendships. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 39(4), 901–917. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2009.00465.x>
- Bleske-Rechek, A., Joseph, W. E., Williquette, H., & Donovan, B. (2016). Sex differences in young adults' attraction to opposite-sex friends: Natural sampling versus mental

- concepts. *Evolutionary Psychological Science*, 2(3), 214–219. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40806-016-0056-6>
- Elsesser, K., & Peplau, L. A. (2006). The glass partition: Obstacles to cross-sex friendships at work. *Human Relations*, 59(8), 1077–1100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726706068783>
- Felmlee, D., & Muraco, A. (2009). Gender and friendship norms among older adults. *Research on Aging*, 31(3), 318–344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027508330719>
- Gilchrist-Petty, E., & Bennett, L. K. (2019). Cross-sex best friendships and the experience and expression of jealousy within romantic relationships. *Journal of Relationships Research*, 10, e18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2019.16>
- Halatsis, P., & Christakis, N. (2009). The challenge of sexual attraction within heterosexuals' cross-sex friendship. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 26(6-7), 919–937. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407509345650>
- Hart, W., Adams, J., & Tullett, A. (2015). “It’s complicated”: Sex differences in perceptions of cross-sex friendships. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 156(2), 190–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2015.1076762>
- Hinchliff, S., Fileborn, B., Alba, B., Lyons, A., Minichiello, V., Barrett, C., Brown, G., Malta, S., & Dow, B. (2021). Talking about sex with friends: Perspectives of older adults from the sex, age & me study in Australia. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 23(3), 367–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2019.1710568>
- Leibowitz, U. D. (2018). What is friendship? *Disputatio*, 10(49), 97–117. <https://doi.org/10.2478/disp-2018-0008>
- Lemay, E. P., & Wolf, N. R. (2016a). Human mate poaching tactics are effective: Evidence from a dyadic prospective study on opposite-sex “friendships.” *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 7(4), 374–380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550615623843>
- Lemay, E. P., & Wolf, N. R. (2016b). Projection of romantic and sexual desire in opposite-sex friendships: How wishful thinking creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 42(7), 864–878. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216646077>
- Lewis, D. M. G., Conroy-Beam, D., Al-Shawaf, L., Raja, A., DeKay, T., & Buss, D. M. (2011). Friends with benefits: The evolved psychology of same- and opposite-sex friendship. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 9(4), 543–563. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147470491100900407>
- McCubbery, M.-C. (2006). *Perceptions of one’s own and romantic partner’s opposite-sex friendships* [Swinburne University of Technology]. <https://researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/file/5fa9a026-67b2-487d-b868-8da7752d6ef7/1/Marie-Claire%20McCubbery%20Thesis.pdf>

- Meskelyte, J., & Lyons, M. (2022). Fear of crime and preference for aggressive-formidable same-sex and opposite-sex friends. *Current Psychology*, 41(3), 1434–1439. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-020-00679-3>
- Miller, M. J., Denes, A., Diaz, B., & Ranjit, Y. (2014). Touch attitudes in cross-sex friendships: We're just friends. *Personal Relationships*, 21(2), 309–323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12033>
- O'Meara, J. D. (1989). Cross-sex friendship: Four basic challenges of an ignored relationship. *Sex Roles*, 21(7–8), 525–543. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00289102>
- Proscal, A. D., Demir, M., Doğan, A., Özen, A., & Sümer, N. (2015). Cross-sex friendship and happiness. In *Friendship and happiness* (pp. 171–185). Springer Science + Business Media. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-017-9603-3_10
- Rodríguez-Cárdenas, D., E. (2021). The research on friendship in Latin America: Progress, challenges, and new directions. In *Friendship in Cultural and Personality Psychology: International Perspectives* (pp. 205–222). <https://intellectum.unisabana.edu.co/handle/10818/60194?locale-attribute=es>
- Schoonover, K., & McEwan, B. (2014). Are you really just friends? Predicting the audience challenge in cross-sex friendships. *Personal Relationships*, 21(3), 387–403. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12040>
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- Szymkow, A., & Frankowska, N. (2022). Moderators of sexual interest in opposite-sex friends. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 20(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14747049211068672>
- Tuval-Mashiach, R., Walsh, S., Harel, S., & Shulman, S. (2008). Romantic fantasies, cross-gender friendships, and romantic experiences in adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 23(4), 471–487. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558407311332>
- Weger, H., Cole, M., & Akbulut, V. (2018). Relationship maintenance across platonic and non-platonic cross-sex friendships in emerging adults. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 159(1), 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2018.1439876>
- Yang, B., Zhao, X., Wang, T., Zhong, Z., Zhang, Y., Su, S., Wang, J., Zhu, M., & Zang, H. (2023). Effects of the need fulfillment given by opposite-sex friends on breakup considerations: A moderated mediation model. *Acta Psychologica*, 241, 104091. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2023.104091>