

# Are you *really* just friends? Predicting the audience challenge in cross-sex friendships

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## Abstract

Cross-sex friends experience a variety of challenges including the audience challenge: when cross-sex friends are mistaken for a romantic couple by other members of their social network. This research sought to explore the various factors that might influence cross-sex friends' experience of the audience challenge. Cross-sex friends who were strictly platonic were less likely to experience the audience challenge and less likely to be concerned about the audience challenge than individuals in mutual romance, desires romance, or reject romance friendships. Regression analyses indicated cross-sex friends tend to experience the audience challenge the least when their friendship network is supportive of cross-sex friends. The relation between network support and the audience challenge is moderated by romantic desire and sexual activity.

Heterosexual cross-sex friendships, friendships where one individual is male and the other is female, are not always viewed as a normative relationship (Monsour, Harris, Kurzweil, & Beard, 1994; Rawlins, 2009). However, the men and women who participate in these friendships see them as relationally important (Rawlins, 2009). Individuals report cross-sex friendships to be less competitive than same-sex friendships (Rawlins, 2009), and they enjoy cross-sex friendships because their communication styles complement each other (Holmstrom, 2009; Rawlins, 2009). Cross-sex friendships are more common during young adulthood (Rawlins, 2009; Reeder, 2000), and both men and women tend to have not only one, but several heterosexual cross-sex friends (Holmstrom,

2009; Kaplan & Keys, 1997; Reeder, 2000). Some of these friendships may be strictly platonic, but others may include the desire for romance (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005).

Rawlins (2009) argued that one of the most challenging aspects of a cross-sex friendship is the way heterosexual romantic love is encouraged and institutionalized, thus causing potential difficulties for cross-sex friends who wish to be viewed as a platonic couple. This problem has been termed the *audience challenge* (O'Meara, 1989). Monsour, Harvey, and Betty (1997) defined the audience challenge as "attempts by cross-sex friends to present the correct picture of their relationship to members of their respective social networks, who mistakenly assume that the cross-sex friends are actually romantic or sexual partners" (p. 826). This study seeks to specifically examine relational and social factors that influence the audience challenge of cross-sex friendships (O'Meara, 1989).

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## *Cross-Sex Friendships*

Wright (1984) defined friendship as a relationship "involving voluntary or unconstrained interaction in which the participants respond to one another personally, that is, as unique individuals rather than mere role occupants"

(p. 119). Almost all close friendships, whether they are same-sex male, same-sex female, or cross-sex, involve shared interests, activities, self-disclosure, and emotional support (Wright, 1988). Connections to a friendship network may be particularly important for young adults (Carbury & Buhrmester, 1998; Chow, Roelse, Buhrmester, & Underwood, 2012). O'Meara (1989) defined cross-sex friendships as friendships that are "non-romantic, nonfamilial, personal relationships" between men and women (p. 526). For young adults, cross-sex friendships may represent an important component of one's friendship network (Kaplan & Keys, 1997). However, not all cross-sex friendships are experienced as purely platonic; some members of cross-sex friendship dyads see the potential for romance in their relationships, although this romantic desire could be one-sided (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Rawlins, 1982). Based on personal feelings or interpersonal events in cross-sex friendships, the relationship could remain a platonic friendship, become a romantic relationship, or fall apart (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Rawlins, 1982).

### *Cross-sex friendship types*

Guerrero and Chavez (2005) identified four different cross-sex friendship types. They are *strictly platonic*, *mutual romance*, *desires romance*, and *rejects romance*. A strictly platonic cross-sex friendship is defined as a friendship where one individual does not want the friendship to turn romantic and believes that the other individual does not want the relationship to turn romantic either. A mutual romance cross-sex friendship is a friendship in which one individual wants the friendship to turn romantic and believes that the other individual involved in the friendship also wants that to happen. A desires romance cross-sex friendship is a friendship in which one individual wants the relationship to become romantic but believes that the other individual does not. A rejects romance cross-sex friendship is a friendship in which one individual does not want a romantic relationship but believes that the other person wants the friendship to become romantic.

Guerrero and Chavez's (2005) conceptualizations of different types of cross-sex friendships provide important distinctions for researchers who want to understand why different situations, such as the audience challenge, affect cross-sex friends differently. However, for some data analyses, continuous measures of relational characteristics underlying the different types of cross-sex friendships may be more useful. Guerrero and Chavez validated their friendship type operationalization with two continuous items measuring romantic desire. They found that mutual romance and desires romance friends experienced more romantic feelings than rejects romance and strictly platonic friends. We also think cross-sex friendship types are also likely to differ on sexual desire as well as romantic desire. In addition, recent research (Mongeau, Knight, Williams, Eden, & Shaw, 2013) suggests that some friends may engage in sexual activity. We argue that some types of cross-sex friends may be more likely to engage in sexual activity than others.

*H1: Cross-sex friendship types may vary on relational characteristics such that mutual romance and desires romance friends will experience greater romantic and sexual desire than rejects romance and strictly platonic friends, and mutual romance friends will be more likely to experience sexual activity than the other three types.*

### *Audience challenge*

Rawlins (2009) noted that being viewed as a potential romantic couple is one of the more challenging aspects of maintaining a cross-sex friendship. Since male-female romantic relationships are seen as more normative than male-female friendships, network members may view cross-sex friends as potentially heading toward a less platonic union, creating the audience challenge. Monsour (2002) argued that adult cross-sex friends must be careful when presenting their friendship to other social network members so that they are not mistaken for romantic partners or potential romantic partners.

The audience challenge is one of four cross-sex friendship challenges outlined by O'Meara (1989; the others are the emotional bond challenge, the sexual challenge, and the inequity challenge). The audience challenge of cross-sex friendships refers to how network members outside the friend relationship view the friendship. Cross-sex friends may be viewed by the external audience in two ways (O'Meara, 1989). First, the members outside the relationship can accept the presentation of the cross-sex friendship to be authentically platonic (O'Meara, 1989). Communicating authentic friendship to members outside the relationship is important for cross-sex friends because of the impact external audiences may have on the friendship (O'Meara, 1989; Rawlins, 1982, 2009). If the friendship is seen as authentically platonic, the members outside the friendship will view the relationship as a friendship, and interaction with the audience will positively reinforce the platonic relationship the cross-sex friends have (O'Meara, 1989).

Conversely, people outside the relationship might assume that the individuals in the friendship are seeing each other romantically, or assume that there is a hidden sexual agenda by one or both members of the friendship (O'Meara, 1989). If it is assumed that the friends are seeing each other romantically or that there is a hidden sexual agenda, the members of the friendship must manage the public presentation of the dyad to make sure it communicates authentic friendship to the external audience (O'Meara, 1989). Members outside the friendship may want the friends to be a romantic couple when the friends do not (Werking, 1997), or one or both members of the friendship may be involved in a separate romantic relationship, and those romantic partners may become jealous or suspicious of the friendship (O'Meara, 1989; Rawlins, 1982, 2009). If the friends are receiving unwanted pressure to become romantic, or one or both of them has to deal with jealousy from a romantic partner, it could cause tension in the friendship, which may ultimately lead to loss of friendship. To avoid giving the wrong impression, the friends have to balance the tensions of what is perceived

about the relationship publicly and what is actually privately true about the friendship (Rawlins, 1982; Samter & Cupach, 1998).

Research reports regarding the prevalence of the audience challenge are mixed. Early work by Monsour and colleagues (Monsour et al., 1994; Monsour et al., 1997) found that the majority of cross-sex friends did not report experiencing the audience challenge. However, Monsour (2002) later argued that whenever cross-sex friendships are visible to the public the relationship may be misunderstood as a romantic or potentially romantic one. Monsour's later argument appears to be based on research by Werking (1997), which found that all the cross-sex friends in her study had been approached by a third party to find out if the cross-sex friendship was a romantic relationship.

The differences in these studies might reflect differences in the type of cross-sex friends that were sampled. As noted above, more recent research by Guerrero and Chavez (2005) has found four different types of cross-sex friends. The experience of the audience challenge might differ based on the type of cross-sex friendship that an individual is engaged in.

#### *The audience challenge for cross-sex friendship types*

Members of different types of cross-sex friendships may experience the audience challenge differently. Mutual romance couples may indeed be becoming a romantic couple in the nascent stages of their relationship. If their mutually romantic feelings lead them to behave romantically toward each other they may be the most likely to be mistaken for a romantic couple. Desires romance and rejects romance couples may also experience the audience challenge. Again, if network members witness the partner who desires a more romantic relationship acting romantically or confessing their romantic feelings, the network members may be more likely to view the cross-sex dyad as a potentially romantic relationship rather than a friendship. Friends who are strictly platonic should be the least likely to trigger the audience challenge.

*H2a: Experiencing the audience challenge will vary by relational type, such that mutual romance friendship types will report experiencing the audience challenge the most followed by rejects romance and desires romance. Strictly platonic friends will report experiencing the audience challenge the least.*

Members of the different types of cross-sex friendships as identified by Guerrero and Chavez (2005) might also perceive the audience challenge differently. Guerrero and Chavez noted that different types of cross-sex friends experienced different levels of relational uncertainty. Relational uncertainty refers to the level of confidence relational partners have about the shared perception of the definition of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). Relational uncertainty may be particularly likely to occur in cross-sex friendships because cross-sex friends may spend little time explicitly defining the status of the relationship (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005). The transition from casual involvement to serious dating has been shown to be one of the most turbulent periods for a cross-sex dyad (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) in part due to the increased relational uncertainty. Cross-sex friend types that experience romantic interest may find themselves in the midst of this relational turbulence.<sup>1</sup>

The level of turbulence experienced in a relationship may affect the level of concern that individuals have regarding the audience challenge. Increased relational turbulence affects how cross-sex dyad members view the behaviors and evaluations of their network member toward the relationship (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). Knobloch and Donovan-Kicken (2006) found that experiencing relational turbulence led couples to feel that appraisals and input from network members hindered the relationship. When individuals view their relationship as experiencing relational turbulence as friends in desires romance and rejects romance friendships might, they also may find their friends

and family's appraisal of the relationship particularly unhelpful. Cross-sex friends who desire romance may be concerned that premature or misplaced network evaluations of the friendship as romantic might harm the friendship that they hope might turn romantic. Rejects romance individuals might be concerned that the audience will create further confusion for the friendship given that they have rejected the romantic label.

Mutual romance couples may also experience relational uncertainty. These friends could be experiencing the highly turbulent transition to serious dating (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Although mutual romance cross-sex friends may like to be seen as a romantic couple one day soon, they may wish to avoid the appraisals of others at this delicate stage of moving their friendship to romance. From this relational turbulence perspective, strictly platonic friends may be the least likely to be concerned about the audience challenge. Such friends have an agreed-upon relational definition and are likely to be experiencing little relational uncertainty and turbulence.

*H2b: The level of concern an individual has regarding the audience challenge will vary by relational type, such that desires romance and rejects romance friendship types will report experiencing the audience challenge the most followed by mutual romance. Strictly platonic friends are the least likely to be concerned about the audience challenge.*

#### *Contextual variables that predict audience challenge*

##### *Presence of a romantic partner*

Previous research on cross-sex friendships has rarely accounted for the romantic status of individuals involved in the friendship (Fuhrman, Flannagan, & Matamoros, 2009). However, the presence of a romantic partner may affect the cross-sex friendship in that cross-sex friends may feel additional pressure to downplay the significance of their

1. The authors wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this line of argument.

friendship when one or both of them has a romantic partner (Fuhrman et al., 2009; Samter & Cupach, 1998; Werking, 1997). On the other hand, the presence of a romantic partner may reduce the likelihood of experiencing the audience challenge. Because of the norm of exclusivity (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999; Sternberg, 1987) individuals who are known to have a romantic partner may be less likely to be considered a potential romantic partner by the audience. In addition, cross-sex friends with romantic partners may also be less likely to worry that people will think they are planning to start a romantic relationship with their cross-sex friend.

*H3a: Individuals with a cross-sex friend will experience the audience challenge less when the individual has a romantic partner.*

*H3b: Individuals with a cross-sex friend will report a lower level of concern regarding the audience challenge when the individual has a romantic partner.*

#### *Total number of cross-sex friends*

How many cross-sex friends an individual has may influence the audience challenge, because having multiple cross-sex friends indicates that cross-sex friendships are not exclusive relationships like romantic relationships are. Most likely an individual will not have a romantic relationship with all of his or her cross-sex friends. Presumably the more cross-sex friends an individual has the more likely he or she will be seen out in public with different cross-sex friends, unlike in romantic relationships where more time is likely to be spent with the significant other than with various friends (Rawlins, 2009; Werking, 1997). The more often members outside the friendship see an individual spending time with different cross-sex friends, the more likely they may be to perceive that the friendships are authentic, and no assumptions will be made about the friendships being romantic relationships.

*H4a: The more cross-sex friends an individual has, the less the individual will experience the audience challenge for a particular cross-sex friendship.*

*H4b: The more cross-sex friends an individual has, the less the individual will be concerned regarding the audience challenge for a particular cross-sex friendship.*

#### *Social network support for cross-sex friendships*

The involvement of social networks in cross-sex friendships is important when considering the audience challenge, because the way members of a social network view engaging in a cross-sex friendship is likely to influence perceptions of the audience challenge.

If individuals participating in a cross-sex friendship have a social network that does not approve of cross-sex friendships, social network members may question the lack of romantic involvement in the relationship, or try to push cross-sex friends to develop romantic ties (Samter & Cupach, 1998). Cross-sex friends may then need to confront the audience challenge through working to show the authenticity of the friendship and avoid pressures from individuals outside the friendship who feel the friends would be better suited as romantic partners (Rawlins, 2009). Cross-sex friends who do have romantic interest might avoid the expression of romantic behavior in order to avoid disapproval from social network members (Fuhrman et al., 2009; Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000; Rawlins, 2009; Reeder, 2000). On the other hand, if the social network views a platonic state as normative for cross-sex friendships it may not question whether a particular cross-sex friendship is romantic or potentially romantic, thus lessening the audience challenge perceived by the friendship dyad. Furthermore, if an individual perceives that his or her network considers cross-sex friendships to be an acceptable relationship format and generally platonic, that individual will likely spend little time worrying about the perception of the social network.

*H5a: Individuals will experience the audience challenge less if they perceive social network support for cross-sex friendships.*

*H5b: If an individual perceives social network support for cross-sex friendships, the individual will report a lower level of concern regarding the audience challenge.*

#### *Routine contact*

Guerrero and Chavez (2005) noted that individuals interested in ramping up their cross-sex friendship to a romantic relationship were more likely to use the maintenance strategy of routine contact. Thus, the very friends whose relational status is questionable may be the ones spending more time together. Cross-sex friends who communicate frequently and spend lots of time together may be more likely to be mistaken as a potential romantic couple than those whose contact is less frequent. In part this may be because these cross-sex friends are acting similarly to romantic couples, which may confuse the network or it may simply be that there is more opportunity to mistake these individuals for romantic partners.

*H6a: The more one spends time with his or her cross-sex friend, the more he or she will experience the audience challenge.*

*H6b: The more one spends time with his or her cross-sex friend, the more he or she will be concerned about the audience challenge.*

#### *Cross-sex friendship characteristics*

As noted previously, when cross-sex friendships are perceived by the social network as generally platonic, the audience challenge for a particular cross-sex friend is likely greatly diminished. However, as also noted, not all cross-sex friends are strictly platonic (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Kaplan & Keys, 1997). One or both members of the cross-sex friendship dyad may experience romantic

attraction for his or her friend (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005). In addition, it is not unheard of for cross-sex friends to experience sexual desire or even engage in sexual activity with their friend (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005; Mongeau et al., 2013). The presence of romantic desire, sexual desire, and sexual activity may lead to confusion in the social network in regards to labeling the relationship as platonic or romantic. If the network is aware of these nonplatonic feelings they may be more likely to question the authenticity of the cross-sex friendship as a friendship. Even if the network is not aware of these nonplatonic desires, the presence of such feelings may cause the individual in the cross-sex friendship to worry more about how the audience views the cross-sex friendship.

*RQ1: Will characteristics of the cross-sex friendship such as romantic desire, sexual desire, and sexual activity moderate the relationship between context variables and (a) the experience of the audience challenge and (b) the level of concern an individual has regarding the audience challenge?*

#### **Method**

##### *Participants*

The sample for this research study consists of 193 young adults. Participants were recruited through Facebook and from undergraduate communication classes at a midsize Midwest American university. Participants were asked to complete an online survey, and if the survey was taken for a class a nominal amount of extra credit was offered. To make sure data were collected for heterosexual cross-sex friendships, participants were asked to select the number on a 7-point Likert-type scale that best represents their sexual orientation (1 = homosexual, 7 = heterosexual). Participants who selected a 4 or below ( $n = 5$ ) were dropped from the study.

Of the 193 young adults to complete the survey 75 were male and 118 were female, with a mean age of 23.31 ( $SD = 2.52$ ) ranging from ages 18 to 29. Young adults were

sampled for this study because heterosexual cross-sex friendships are most common for young adults (Rawlins, 2009; Reeder, 2000). It was also ideal to obtain people in their early 20s because they are more likely to have different types of cross-sex friendships, and not just strictly platonic cross-sex friendships (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005). The sample was 86.3% White, 8.5% Black, 2.6% Asian, 0.9% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 1.7% preferred not to answer.

Additionally, participants were asked how many cross-sex friends they had ( $M = 15.29$ ,  $SD = 21.49$ ) with a range of 1 cross-sex friend to 200 cross-sex friends. An examination of the distribution of the number of cross-sex friends reported indicated that reports of over 100 cross-sex friends were outliers. Four participants (two reporting 100 cross-sex friends, one reporting 115 cross-sex friends, and one reporting 200 cross-sex friends) were removed from analyses that used number of cross-sex friends as a predictor as it is unlikely that individuals had meaningful conceptions of their relationships with over 100 different cross-sex friends. After removing these participants the mean number of friends reported was 12.74 ( $SD = 11.56$ ) with a range of 1 to 75.

Participants were asked whether or not they have a romantic partner (89 participants reported they did; 102 participants reported they did not). Participants with a romantic partner had been in a relationship with their romantic partner for an average of 30.39 months ( $SD = 29.86$ , range = 1 month to 132 months). Eleven reported being merely romantically involved (i.e., casual), 51 were dating (i.e., boyfriend/girlfriend), 11 were engaged, 13 were married, and 2 reported the category of “other.”

#### *Procedure*

Participants were asked to take an online survey. At the beginning of the survey each participant was instructed that the questionnaire required recalling and reporting activities used in a cross-sex friendship. The participant then received the definition used by Guerrero and Chavez (2005) to define what a cross-sex friendship is, “Cross-sex friends are defined

as friends who you spend time with but do not currently date” (p. 345), and was asked to think of a cross-sex friend and write down that friend’s initials. Participants were asked to keep this friend in mind as they answered the questions.

#### *Measures*

All items were measured on 7-point Likert-type scales.

#### *Audience challenge*

Twelve items were used to measure the audience challenge ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ). Three of these items are from Monsour and colleagues (1994) and the remaining items were developed by the researchers in order to address both the frequency of being mistaken for a romantic couple (e.g., “How often are you and your cross-sex friend mistaken for a romantic couple?”) and the frequency of being viewed as a potentially romantic couple (e.g., “How often do your friends mention your friendship should be a romantic relationship?”). Items were coded such that a score of 1 meant that participants never experienced the audience challenge. A score of 7 indicated that participants frequently experienced the audience challenge.

#### *Concern regarding the audience challenge*

Eight items were used to measure how concerned participants were regarding the audience challenge ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ,  $\alpha = .80$ ). Items were coded such that a score of 1 meant that participants had few worries regarding the audience challenge. A score of 7 meant that participants were highly concerned regarding the audience challenge (e.g., “I’m not worried that my significant other may mistake us as a romantic couple”; “I’m not concerned that friends will pressure us to be a romantic couple”; “I’m not concerned that family may perceive us as a romantic couple”).

#### *Friendship type*

Friendship type was measured using the Friendship Situation (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005). Participants selected scenarios that identify their cross-sex friendship as strictly

platonic ( $n = 90$ ), mutual romance ( $n = 28$ ), desires romance ( $n = 32$ ), or rejects romance ( $n = 31$ ).

### *Relational characteristics of friendship types*

Conceptually, friendship types should vary on three continuous dimensions *romantic desire*, *sexual desire*, and *sexual activity*. Two items developed by Guerrero and Chavez (2005) plus three items developed by the researchers were used to measure romantic desire ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ,  $\alpha = .97$ ; e.g., "I have romantic feelings for my friend"). Five items developed by the researchers measured sexual desire ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 2.20$ ,  $\alpha = .98$ ; e.g., "I desire my friend sexually"). Three items developed by the researchers measured the reported occurrence of sexual activity in the friendship ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ; e.g., "I have sexual intercourse with my friend"). Items were coded such that a score of 1 indicated participants strongly disagreed with the item and a score of 7 indicated participants strongly agreed with the item. In order to determine the latent factor structure of the items used to determine the Relational Characteristics scale (Gerbing & Hamilton, 1996; Park, Dailey, & Lemus, 2002), the items were analyzed using maximum likelihood extraction and a promax rotation (see Costello & Osborne, 2005). An oblique rotation was used because it was reasonable to assume that correlations would exist between romantic desire, sexual desire, and engaging in sexual activity. Factor retention was based on parallel analysis comparison to 95th percentile eigenvalues (Hayton, Allen, & Scarfello, 2004; Patil, Singh, Mishra, & Donavan, 2007). The parallel analysis comparison suggested that three factors should be retained. All items had at least a minimum factor loading of .72 with no cross-loading. Thus, all items were retained on their respective factors based on Tabachnick and Fidell's (2001) criteria (Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value [KMO] = .936).

### *Network support*

Network support for a cross-sex friendship was measured using a modified version of

the Perceived Same-Sex Network Support scale ( $\alpha = .95$ ; Hughes et al., 2005). The participants responded to a modified version of the scale three times, once for friends, once for family, and once for their romantic partner. (e.g., "My friends are supportive of cross-sex friendship"; "My family encourages me to have cross-sex friends") Additionally, network support was measured individually between the groups of friends ( $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ), family ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ), and significant other ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ).

## Results

### *Preliminary analyses*

#### *Audience challenge and level of concern for audience challenge*

We conducted a paired samples  $t$  test in order to explore if individuals cared about the audience challenge significantly more than they reported experiencing the audience challenge. Individuals did report being concerned about the audience challenge ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) significantly more than they experienced the audience challenge ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ),  $t(157) = -3.47$ ,  $p = .001$ . In line with Monsour and colleagues (Monsour et al., 1994; Monsour et al., 1997), these results indicate that individuals sometimes, but not often, experience the audience challenge. Further, they experience a level of concern regarding the possibility that they might experience the audience challenge at a significantly greater level than they actually experience the challenge.

#### *Gender*

An independent samples  $t$  test was conducted to explore if men and women experienced the audience challenge differently or had different levels of concern regarding the audience challenge. Both the test for the audience challenge,  $t(169) = 1.56$ ,  $p = .121$ , and the test for the level of concern,  $t(156) = .16$ ,  $p = .872$ , were nonsignificant.

Independent samples  $t$  tests were also conducted to explore if men and women reported

different amounts of romantic desire,  $t(191) = 3.67$ ,  $p < .001$ , ( $M_{men} = 3.62$ ,  $SD_{men} = 1.90$ ,  $M_{women} = 2.58$ ,  $SD_{women} = 1.95$ ); sexual desire,  $t(191) = 4.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , ( $M_{men} = 4.33$ ,  $SD_{men} = 1.91$ ,  $M_{women} = 2.90$ ,  $SD_{women} = 2.20$ ); and sexual activity,  $t(190) = 2.60$ ,  $p < .01$ , ( $M_{men} = 2.68$ ,  $SD_{men} = 1.97$ ,  $M_{women} = 1.97$ ,  $SD_{women} = 1.67$ ). All three  $t$  tests were significant. However, in later analyses gender did not significantly moderate relation between the hypothesized variables.

### *Hypotheses tests*

#### *Relational type and relational characteristics*

Hypothesis 1 predicted that cross-sex friendships would differ on relational characteristics. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to explore if different types of cross-sex friendships varied in terms of romantic desire, sexual desire, and sexual activity (see Table 1). The results of the MANOVA indicated that cross-sex friendship types do vary on these characteristics,  $F(3, 176) = 26.16$ ,  $p < .001$ , Wilks's  $\lambda = .34$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .30$ . Friendship types varied on romantic and sexual desire such that mutual romance and desires romance friends reported significantly more romantic and sexual desire than rejects romance friends who reported significantly more romantic desire than strictly platonic friends. Mutual romance friends reported significantly more sexual activity than the other friendship types. Desires romance and rejects romance friends reported significantly more sexual activity than strictly platonic friends.

#### *Relational type and the audience challenge*

Hypothesis 2a predicted that reports of the audience challenge would differ by friendship type with mutual romance friendship types experiencing the audience challenge the most, followed by rejects romance, desires romance, and strictly platonic. To test Hypothesis 2a, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted (see Table 2). The results indicated that experiencing the audience challenge did differ

across friendship types,  $F(3, 151) = 5.38$ ,  $p < .01$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .10$ . Mutual romance friends experienced the audience challenge the most followed by rejects romance, desires romance, and strictly platonic.

A second one-way ANOVA test was conducted to test Hypothesis 2b (see Table 2). Hypothesis 2b predicted that the level of concern for the audience challenge would be the greatest for desires romance and rejects romance cross-sex friends, followed by mutual romance, and the strictly platonic friends. Results for Hypothesis 2b indicated that perceptions of how challenging the audience challenge was did differ across friendship types,  $F(3, 164) = 2.75$ ,  $p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ . We were correct that strictly platonic friends felt less concern about the audience challenge than the other friendship types. However mutual romance felt more concern regarding the audience challenge than desires romance and rejects romance which was the reverse of our prediction.

#### *Context variables*

Hypotheses 3a, 4a, 5a, and 6a posited that variables related to the context of the cross-sex friendship would predict the *experience* of the audience challenge. A regression analysis was conducted to test these hypotheses. All predictor variables were mean centered for this and all further regression analyses. A dummy-coded variable for having a romantic partner was entered as Step 1 (H3a). Following the dichotomous variable the remaining steps were entered based on the strength of their zero-order correlations with the audience challenge variable. Thus, the number of cross-sex friends was entered as Step 2 (H4a), network support variables (romantic partner, friend, and family) were entered as Step 3 (H5a), and routine contact was entered as Step 4 (H6a). The results suggested that these variables do predict concerns regarding the audience challenge,  $F(6, 185) = 5.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .16$ . In the first block of the model, having a romantic partner did not significantly predict perceptions of the audience challenge,  $t(190) = -1.41$ ,  $p = .081$ ,  $R^2 = .01$ . Thus, H3a was not supported. When number of cross-sex friends

**Table 1.** Means for relational characteristics for cross-sex friendship types

Friendship type ( <i>n</i> )	Romantic desire	Sexual desire	Sexual activity
Strictly Platonic (88)	1.79 <sub>a</sub> (1.26)	2.25 <sub>a</sub> (1.75)	1.50 <sub>a</sub> (1.16)
Mutual romance (28)	5.31 <sub>b</sub> (1.38)	5.37 <sub>b</sub> (1.55)	4.30 <sub>b</sub> (1.94)
Desires romance (32)	4.91 <sub>b</sub> (1.34)	5.45 <sub>b</sub> (1.41)	2.31 <sub>c</sub> (2.01)
Rejects romance (31)	2.54 <sub>c</sub> (1.99)	3.59 <sub>c</sub> (2.08)	2.67 <sub>c</sub> (2.08)

Note. Means with different subscripts (within a column) are significantly different from one another. Significance tests based on post hoc least significant difference tests.

**Table 2.** Means for audience challenge for cross-sex friendship types

Friendship type ( <i>n</i> )	Audience challenge	Level of concern
Strictly platonic (82)	2.47 <sub>a</sub> ( <i>SD</i> = 1.51)	3.02 <sub>a</sub> ( <i>SD</i> = 1.60)
Mutual romance (27)	3.54 <sub>b</sub> ( <i>SD</i> = 1.56)	3.73 <sub>b</sub> ( <i>SD</i> = 1.23)
Desires romance (28)	2.94 <sub>a,b</sub> ( <i>SD</i> = 1.23)	3.68 <sub>b</sub> ( <i>SD</i> = 1.39)
Rejects romance (31)	3.47 <sub>b</sub> ( <i>SD</i> = 1.41)	3.54 <sub>a,b</sub> ( <i>SD</i> = 1.22)

Note. Means with different subscripts (within a column) are significantly different from one another. Significance tests based on post hoc least significant difference tests.

was entered in the second block of the model, the number of cross-sex friends did not significantly predict the amount of variance ( $\Delta R^2 = .000$ ) in experiencing the audience challenge above and beyond having a romantic partner,  $t(189) = .131$ ,  $p = .448$ . Thus, H4a was not supported. When network support was entered in the third block of the model, support for cross-sex friends from the social network predicted a significant amount of variance ( $\Delta R^2 = .05$ ) in experiencing the audience challenge above and beyond the previous steps. However, network support from friends was the only significant predictor,  $t = -2.27$ ,  $p < .05$ , indicating partial support for H5a in that network support from friends was a significant and negative predictor of experiencing the audience challenge. The more friends supported cross-sex friendships in general, the less a participant reported experiencing the audience challenge. In the final model, routine contact predicted a significant amount of variance in the audience challenge above and beyond the previous steps,  $t(185) = 4.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .10$ . Thus, Hypothesis 6a was also supported. The greater the amount of routine contact that friends have with each other, the more likely it is that they will experience the audience

challenge. See Table 3 for a summary of the final model.

Hypotheses 3b, 4b, 5b, and 6b posited that variables related to the context of the cross-sex friendship would predict the *level of concern* cross-sex friends would have for the audience challenge. A regression analysis was conducted to test these hypotheses. A dummy-coded variable for having a romantic partner was entered as Step 1 (H3b), the number of cross-sex friends was entered as Step 2 (H4b), network support variables (romantic partner, friend, and family) were entered as Step 3 (H5b), and routine contact was entered as Step 4 (H6b). The results suggested that these variables do predict concerns regarding the audience challenge,  $F(6, 185) = 10.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .25$ . In the first block of the model, H3b was supported: Having a romantic partner did significantly predict perceptions of the audience challenge,  $t(190) = -2.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .04$ . When cross-sex friends were entered in the second block of the model, H2b was minimally supported: The number of cross-sex friends did significantly predict a small amount of variance ( $\Delta R^2 = .015$ ) in perceptions of the audience challenge above and beyond having a romantic partner,  $t(189) = -1.74$ ,  $p < .05$ . When network

**Table 3.** Final models predicting main effects for audience challenge and level of concern

Predictor variable	Audience challenge		Level of concern	
	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$
Romantic relationships status	-.01	-0.08	-.08	-1.12
Number of cross-sex friends	.06	0.82	-.05	-0.69
Social support from friends	-.31	-2.54*	-.35	-2.97**
Social support from family	-.02	-0.135	-.03	-0.27
Social support from romantic partner	.09	0.881	-.12	-1.18
Routine contact	.35	4.60***	.09	1.31

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

support was entered in the third block of the model, support for cross-sex friends from the social network predicted a significant amount of variance ( $\Delta R^2 = .19$ ) in the audience challenge above and beyond the previous steps. However, H5b was only partially supported as only social support from friends was a significant predictor,  $t(186) = -2.92$ ,  $p < .01$ . In the final model, routine contact did not predict a significant amount of variance in the audience challenge above and beyond the previous steps,  $t(185) = 1.31$ ,  $p = .10$   $\Delta R^2 = .01$ . Thus, H6b was not supported. See Table 3 for a summary of the final model.

#### Moderating relational characteristics

Research Question 1 sought to investigate if the relational characteristics associated with the different cross-sex friendship types would moderate the relationship between the context variables and the experience of the audience challenge and/or the level of concern friends had regarding the audience challenge. In order to explore possible interactions, a series of analyses were conducted using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012). Analyses were conducted for predictors that had significant main effects on the audience challenge and level of concern for the audience challenge. The three proposed moderators were *romantic desire*, *sexual desire*, and *sexual activity*. Although the items for the three moderators factored cleanly in an exploratory factor analysis, there was multicollinearity between the three factors (See Table 4), particularly between romantic desire and sexual desire and

sexual desire and sexual activity. Dropping sexual desire from the moderation analyses appeared to resolve the multicollinearity issue. Thus, only romantic desire and sexual activity were included in moderation analyses.

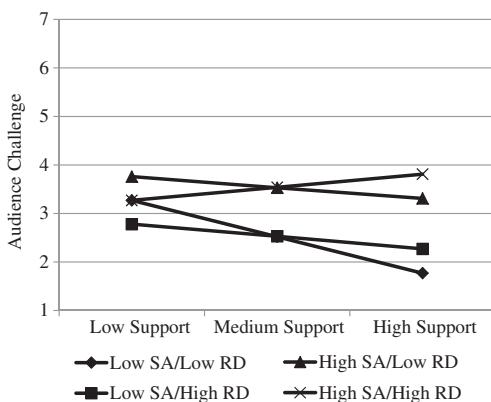
Sexual activity and romantic desire moderated the relation between network support from friends and experiencing the audience challenge (see Figure 1): full model,  $F(5, 151) = 8.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .22$ . The inclusion of both moderators predicted a unique 8% of the variance in the experience of the audience challenge. For friends who experienced low levels of sexual activity and romantic desire, network support from friends decreases the amount of audience challenge the individual experiences. This inverse linear relation also exists for those who reported low levels of sexual activity and high levels of romantic desire and those who reported high levels of sexual activity and low levels of romantic desire, although in both cases the decrease is more gradual and those engaging in sexual activity generally experience the greatest amount of the audience challenge at all levels of support. Friends who reported high levels of both sexual activity and romantic desire reported a positive liner relation between the level of network support from friends and the experience of the audience challenge.

Sexual activity and romantic desire moderated the relationship between network support from friends and the level of concern participants had regarding the audience challenge (see Figure 2): full model,  $F(5, 152) = 11.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .27$ . The inclusion of both moderators predicted a

**Table 4.** Correlations of continuous regression variables

	AC	C	#CSF	Fr	Fa	RP	RD	SD	SA	RC
Audience challenge (AC)	—									
Concern (C)	.35***	—								
Number of cross-sex friends (#CSF)	-.01	-.10	—							
Friend network support (Fr)	-.23**	-.49***	.12	—						
Family network support (Fa)	-.18**	-.45***	.11	.83***	—					
Romantic partner support (RP)	-.12	-.44***	.10	.73***	.77***	—				
Romantic desire (RD)	.27***	.21**	.16**	-.28***	-.31***	-.32***	—			
Sexual desire (SD)	.29***	.21**	.09	-.34***	-.40***	-.44***	.78***	—		
Sexual activity (SA)	.35***	.20**	.03	-.29***	-.31***	-.28***	.55***	.62***	—	
Routine contact (RC)	.57***	.30***	-.13	-.05	-.05	.01	.24***	.18*	.28***	—

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**Figure 1.** Moderating effect of sexual activity and romantic desire on audience challenge. SA = sexual activity; RD = romantic desire; Support = network support from friends.

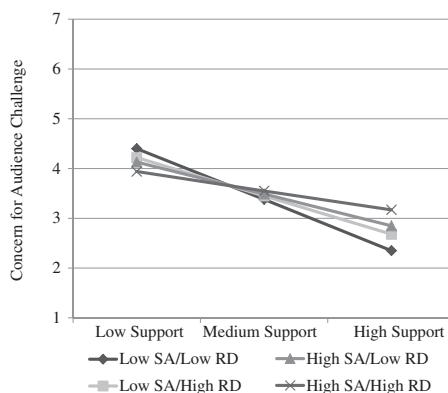
unique 3% of the variance in the experience of the audience challenge. In this case participants experienced an inverse linear relation between the level of network support and the participant's level of concern regarding the audience challenge. However the relation was moderated such that friends reporting low

levels of sexual activity and romantic desire experienced a greater effect from network support than friends who reported neither sexual activity nor romantic desire with friends. Friends who reported both sexual activity and romantic desire experienced the smallest effect of network support on their concern for the audience challenge.

Sexual activity and romantic desire did not moderate the relation between network support from friends and the level of concern participants had regarding the audience challenge (see Figure 2): full model,  $F(5, 152) = 7.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .20$ . The inclusion of both moderators added only 1.5% of explained variance ( $p = .244$ ). Neither sexual activity nor romantic desire was a significant solo moderator.

#### Post hoc analyses

During the hypotheses analyses a question arose as to why mutual romance friends who report sexual activity with their friends consider themselves to be friends rather than romantic partners. In investigating this



**Figure 2.** Moderating effect of sexual activity and romantic desire on concern for audience challenge. SA = sexual activity; RD = romantic desire; Support = network support from friends.

question we discovered that approximately 30% of the mutual romance cross-sex friends reported being in a romantic relationship with someone else. These individuals were more likely than mutual romance cross-sex friends who were not in a romantic relationship to experience sexual activity with their cross-sex friends,  $t(25) = -2.67, p = .01$ . They also were more likely to experience the audience challenge,  $t(24) = -2.30, p < .05$ .

Infidelity may also provide some explanation for suppression effects that we noted in some of our initial regressions that we conducted examining the potential main effects of relational characteristics. During this analysis, sexual activity was found to suppress the effect of having a romantic partner on the audience challenge. Inclusion of sexual activity changed the sign for the effect of romantic relationship status from negative and nonsignificant (meaning that individuals with romantic partners were less likely to experience the audience challenge) to positive and significant. An examination of the part correlations indicated that sexual activity did partially reduce the effect of romantic relationship status,  $r_1 = -.22, r_2 = -.09$ . A post hoc analysis to test for the mediation effect was conducted using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012). This macro performs a 10,000-bootstrap resample procedure. The

bootstrapping method is a preferable test for mediation effects (see Hayes, 2009). As recommended by Preacher and Kelley (2011) the completely standardized indirect effect is interpreted for the significance test. The mediation is considered significant when the 95% confidence intervals around the indirect effect do not include 0, 95% CI [-.1726, -.0422].  $\kappa^2$ , "the proportion of the maximum possible indirect effect that could have occurred" (Preacher & Kelley, 2011, p. 106), is reported as the effect size. Using these guidelines, the relation between romantic relationship status and the audience challenge was significantly mediated by engaging in sexual activity with one's cross-sex friend,  $\kappa^2 = .0932, SE = .0311, 95\% \text{ CI } [.0413, .1665]$ .

## Discussion

Similar to Monsour's (Monsour et al., 1994; Monsour et al., 1997) findings, our results indicated that participants in this sample sometimes, but not often, experience the audience challenge. People also experienced concern regarding the audience challenge at a greater level than the actual audience challenge. This finding suggests that others' perceptions of the cross-sex friendship is something that cross-sex friends do spend time thinking about regardless of how often they are mistaken for a romantic couple or their network suggests they should be a romantic couple. The perceptions that cross-sex friends have regarding others' perceptions of their cross-sex friendship may affect both communication within the friendship and communication to their social network about the friendship.

Our findings help us to understand contextual and relational factors related to when individuals might be more likely to experience the audience challenge and when they might be concerned about the audience challenge. One important factor may be the type of cross-sex friendship. This study provides validation of Guerrero and Chavez's (2005) cross-sex friendship types in that the friendship types varied on the relational characteristics of romantic desire, sexual desire, and sexual activity as expected. Mutual romance friends

experienced these relational characteristics the most, followed by desires romance friends, rejects romance friends, and then strictly platonic.

Intriguingly, rejects romance cross-sex friends were the second most likely to experience sexual activity (although the mean for rejects romance cross-sex friends was not significantly different from desires romance cross-sex friends). It may be that some rejects romance cross-sex friends have experienced sexual activity in the past and are rejecting further advances from their friend. It could also be the case that these cross-sex friends are actually friends with benefits. Our respondents may engage in sexual activity without any romantic intentions, perhaps because the friend is readily available (see Mongeau et al., 2013, for descriptions of friends with benefit relationship types). After engaging in sexual activity a rejects romance cross-sex friend may then find himself or herself fending off romantic advances from the friendship/sexual partner who would rather use the sexual activity as a jumping off point to escalating the friendship to a romantic relationship.

Guerrero and Chavez's (2005) work illustrates that not all cross-sex friends experience relational communication and events related to the friendship in the same way. Individuals may have different experiences based on the type of cross-sex friendship they are in. We hypothesized that individuals would experience the audience challenge and have concern for the audience challenge in different ways based on the type of their cross-sex friendship. Romantic intentions by either or both friends increased both the experience of the audience challenge and the level of concern that the friend reported regarding the audience challenge. Individuals in these friendship types might be experiencing greater relational uncertainty and greater relational turbulence. Knobloch and Donovan-Kicken (2006) found that when people were experiencing relational turbulence they were likely to find input from social network members unhelpful. Our findings are similar in that strictly platonic friends, who according to Guerrero and Chavez (2005) experience the

least amount of relational uncertainty, also experienced and had the least amount of concern regarding the audience challenge. Cross-sex friendship types experiencing greater relational turbulence also had greater concern for the audience challenge and experienced it more.

Mutual romance friends experienced the audience challenge and concern for the audience challenge the most. For the audience challenge, this may be because as mutual romance cross-sex friends become more like romantic partners in terms of romantic desire, sexual desire, and even sexual activity, the network may be confused and more likely to consider the friends to already be a romantic couple. For concern about the audience challenge, one explanation may be that individuals in the nascent stages of moving from a cross-sex friendship to a romantic relationship may worry that pressure from the social network could harm the relationship (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). The post hoc *t* tests point to a second, more subversive explanation. A good portion of the *mutual romance* cross-sex friends also had a romantic partner. For these individuals, being seen as a romantic couple is not only a challenge to their definition of their friendship, it also potentially exposes their infidelity.

In addition to the cross-sex friendship type, two relational contexts also predicted the audience challenge. Network support from friends was a significant predictor of both the audience challenge and concern regarding the audience challenge. The more support for cross-sex friendships an individual felt from his or her network the less likely he or she was to experience the audience challenge or be concerned about it. For the young adults in our sample, it is likely that their friendship network is the most salient audience involved in the audience challenge. Audiences/friends who consider cross-sex friends to be a normative relationship are less likely to think that the cross-sex friends in their network should be a romantic couple. In turn, this support can lead cross-sex friends to be unconcerned about an audience error that rarely occurs.

Routine contact predicted the experience of the audience challenge but did not predict

concern regarding the audience challenge. The more time friends spend together, the more opportunities others may have to mistake the friends for a romantic couple. However, it is likely that other variables (e.g., romantic interest) have a greater impact on whether or not a cross-sex dyad will be concerned if they are considered to be a potential romantic couple. For example, strictly platonic cross-sex friends who spend quite a bit of time together may experience the audience challenge simply because they are seen together, but they are unlikely to be concerned about these appraisals because they are secure in the relational definition.

Our final research question considered whether the relational characteristics of a cross-sex friend would moderate the relation between context variables and the audience challenge. We found that romantic desire and sexual activity did in fact moderate the relation between network support and the audience challenge variables. Generally as network support for cross-sex friendships from friends increased, the experience of the audience challenge decreased. Friendship members may be less likely to inquire about the romantic potential of a cross-sex friendship when they view platonic cross-sex friendship as a normative and common relationship.

The effect of network support is tempered by the existence of romantic desire or sexual activity. Cross-sex friends who desire their friend romantically but have not engaged in sexual activity experience a fairly consistent level of the audience challenge regardless of network support. Similarly, cross-sex friends who engage in sexual activity but do not romantically desire their partner, perhaps engaging in a friends-with-benefits type of relationship, also experience very little effect from levels of network support although they experience the audience challenge in greater degree than both platonic friends and those who experience romantic desire for their cross-sex friend. How individuals in the friendship interact with each other may influence how members outside the relationship will perceive them and judge the friendship. Network members may inquire more about the couple's actual status when they think

a member of the cross-sex friendship dyad has more than a platonic interest in his or her friend. Cross-sex friends who both desire their cross-sex friend romantically and engage in sexual activity with their friend actually experience an increase in the audience challenge as network support for cross-sex friends increases.

One possible explanation for these moderation effects is that at low levels of support, all cross-sex friends are seen as potentially nonnormative and potentially interested in each other romantically. At higher levels of support, cross-sex friends who do not meet the norms of platonic cross-sex friendship may be particularly likely to confuse others regarding their status. Network members who suspect something is different about this particular couple in comparison to platonic cross-sex friends may be more likely to "mistake" the pair as a romantic couple.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

One limitation is that we only collected data from one member of the dyad. This means that although the perceptions of the dyad's friendship type may feel accurate to that friend, it may not accurately describe the friendship. Having both perspectives could be beneficial to the study to find out if perspectives on the friendship are the same. For example, discovering that one friend in the dyad perceived the relationship as desires romance, and the other friend perceived the relationship as strictly platonic could help us better understand how different perspectives in the cross-sex friendship influence the dyadic relationship. Investigating the perspectives of both dyad members could be particularly important in that research suggests that cross-sex friends often avoid discussing aspects of the relationship with each other (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Friends may have very different perceptions of the same cross-sex friendship.

Future research could also examine what happens within the dyadic relationship when cross-sex friends are mistaken as a romantic couple. Knowing how friends interact after

they are mistaken as or pressured to be a romantic couple could help create greater understanding as to why this sample reported caring about the perceptions of others. It would also be beneficial to find out what explanations are or are not given for the friendship when friends are mistaken as or pressured to be a romantic couple. Knowing how cross-sex friends explain that the relationship is only a friendship could provide further insight into how cross-sex friends understand the perspectives of members outside the friendship.

### Conclusion

In recent years scholars have explored the blending of sexual, romantic, and platonic goals in male–female relationships (Connolly et al., 1999; Fuhrman et al., 2009; Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Hughes et al., 2005; Mongeau et al., 2013; Monsour, 2002; Monsour et al., 1994; Monsour et al., 1997; Werking, 1997). This study continues this line of research and furthers it by exploring how the mixing of platonic and romantic intentions may influence network perceptions of cross-sex friendships. Guerrero and Chavez's (2005) work delineating differences between cross-sex friendship types allows for a reconsideration of the various challenges that cross-sex friends might endure based on the premise that friendships with differing characteristics may experience these challenges differently.

Although the audience challenge may not be a frequent occurrence for cross-sex friends, it does occur and cross-sex friends experience varying levels of concern regarding the audience challenge. Our data suggest that most people experience most cross-sex friendships as platonic relationships and thus experience low levels of the audience challenge and concern regarding the audience challenge. Acceptance or disapproval from the peer network appears to have the greatest influence on whether or not an individual in a cross-sex friendship experiences the audience challenge as well as how concerned that individual may be about potential audience challenges. If friendship networks do not support cross-sex friendships, then people are more likely to

experience the audience challenge. However, network support is moderated by relational characteristics such that network support is generally less influential on the experience of the audience challenge and concern regarding the audience challenge if the relationship between the cross-sex friends is more than platonic. In addition, having romantic or sexual feelings for one's cross-sex friend leads to increased concern regarding the audience challenge as well as increased experiences of the audience challenge.

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