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When Similarity Backfires: Similar same-sex others become less attractive in a mating context

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When Similarity Backfires: Similar same-sex others become less attractive in a mating context

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ABSTRACT

When Similarity Backfires: Similar same-sex others become less attractive in a mating context

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Although past studies have found that people are attracted to similar others, this current research finds a more nuanced pattern in a mating context. When people are eager to attract an opposite-sex mate, same-sex others (potential rivals) who appear similar to them are liked less. Consistent results were obtained across two studies that manipulated perceived similarity differently (dressing style, Study 1; humor style, Study 2). In both studies, as past research would predict, preference for similar target person (same-sex) was found in a non-romantic setting. However, this pattern was erased, or even reversed when the primary goal of the social setting was to attract an opposite-sex romantic partner. Study 3 further

examined if the above pattern is moderated by the person's agreeableness level, which reflects chronic concern for interpersonal harmony. Dislike for similar same-sex person was more prominent among low agreeable individuals. This research finds an important exception (i.e., mating context) to the longstanding belief that similarity of others increases liking. When mate attraction is a salient goal, same-sex others who appear similar to the self are liked *less*. This research illustrates the promise of revisiting interpersonal perception from a functional perspective.

Keywords: similarity, attraction, interpersonal perception, intrasexual competition

Introduction

It is widely accepted in social psychology that we are attracted to others with similar characteristics, including attitudes, values, beliefs, personality, physical characteristics, and even the first letter of our names (Boer et al., 2011; Byrne & Nelson, 1964; Crandall et al., 2018; Hampton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2004; Morry, 2007; Singh & Tan, 1992). Friends with similar characteristics tend to last longer, and even perceived similarity in strangers makes people more generous (McPherson et al., 2001; Rushton & Bons, 2005, Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006). What is the underlying benefit of similarity that make us attracted to those whom we resemble?

Considerable research has been invested in examining why people prefer others who possess traits similar to themselves. Interacting with a similar person is likely to boost intimacy via the sharing of common thoughts and humor (Klohn & Luo, 2003; Youyou et al., 2017). These similarities can initially signal common background and shared community goals, which thus solidifies relationships more quickly and easily (Dunbar, 2018). In fact, even minor similarities in ethnic markers (e.g., clothing and hairstyle) can facilitate people to successfully blend into a group (Launay & Dunbar, 2015). Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that similarity with others can sometimes act as a threat than an opportunity—it sometimes pays off to *stand out* from the crowd rather than

blending in (e.g., when mate- or status-seeking: Griskevicius, et al., 2006; Bellezza et al., 2014). For instance, imagine the frustration of a young female who dresses up for a party full of potential romantic partners, only to discover that many of her same-sex friends are dressed just like her. In fact, high school students even form online groups to lay claim to their own unique style (e.g., ‘Don’t Steal My Prom Dress’), preventing distressing moments of looking similar (Meltzer, 2013).

In this study, contrary to the predictions of the classic interpersonal similarity literature, it is proposed that preference for similar others may not hold (or even reverse) when the social goal is the standout from same-sex others. A prime example would be when one is trying to seek a romantic partner. Although similar same-sex peers might signal opportunities sometimes (building social alliance), this study focuses on a situation when peers become potential threats as an intrasexual competitor (Bleske & Shackelford, 2001; Krems et al., 2016; Krems et al., 2019).

The costs and benefits of similarity in same-sex peers

Why would similarity be perceived as a threat in a context of attracting a potential mate? Findings from mate attraction offers evidence (Griskevicius, et al., 2006; Miller, 2000). This line of research suggests that salient positive differentiation from other same-sex individuals is known to be critical strategy for

successfully attracting a mate. When motivated to attract a romantic partner, men tend to buy conspicuous products, come up with unique opinions; and women choose outfits of showy colors (Griskevicius, Goldstein, et al., 2006; Griskevicius et al., 2007). In addition, under such motivational context, advertising products that appeal scarcity (e.g., “limited edition”) turned out to be more effective, whereas social proof appeals that highlight the preference of the mass (e.g., “the choice of millions”) backfired (Griskevicius et al., 2009). Specifically, a person wanting to attract a romantic partner was more inclined to visit a restaurant described as “one-of-a-kind place that is yet to be discovered by others” than the one described as “the most popular restaurant.” Given the importance of standing out from other same-sex individuals in a mating context, the presence of a highly similar person might be perceived as a hindrance (Buss & Blecke, 1998). As such, being near a same-sex individual using similar self-differentiating tactics (e.g., same dress, same jokes) would be disturbing when the goal is to attract a romantic partner.

Furthermore, literature on social comparison adds weight to the idea that similarity might backfire in mating contexts. For instance, people are more likely to be threatened when the comparison target is similar and when the comparison domain is self-relevant (Parrott & Smith, 1993; Suls et al., 2002). In work settings, people show more vigilance towards people who are similar as they are

likely to easily replace their own unique set of skills or ability (Montal-Rosenberg & Moran, 2020; Vecchio, 1995; 2000). A somewhat similar thinking might take place in a romantic setting. People might think a potential same-sex rival could be chosen over them in the romantic competition, particularly if the rival resembles them in many ways.

It appears that perceived similarity of others may operate quite differently in a mating versus a non-mating context. As outlined above, in a mating context, detecting a potentially threatening rival would be important to prevent a costly loss of a desirable partner. Other things being equal, a similar other might pose as a greater threat than a non-similar other in such context. In a non-mating context, however, a same-sex person with similar characteristics to the self is a promising candidate for becoming a close friend (Condon & Crano, 1988; Dunbar, 2018; Mead et al., 2011; Morry, 2007). Indeed, there are considerable benefits in survivability and health benefits of maintaining intimate friendships (Dunbar, 2018; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), and thus it would constitute a missed opportunity when one fails to recognize a similar friend, who might offer long-lasting benefits. As such, in more frequent non-mating situations, people would show strong preference towards such similar peers (Lakin & Chartrand, 2003).

Clearly, there are tradeoffs involved in social similarity. Other person's similarity to the self lends potential opportunities to form new friendships, but it

also aggravates the possibility of becoming a rival in a mating context. How do people manage this tradeoff? Unconditional liking or disliking for a similar other, regardless of context, do not appear to be the most adaptive solution. Instead, the current research predicts that people's evaluation of similar/dissimilar others may fluctuate across social situations, according to the different potential threat and benefit presented by others (Lassetter et al., 2021; McArthur & Baron, 1983; Neuberg et al., 2010). A single preference rule (e.g., liking similar others in all situations) may not be optimal for solving the various, and sometimes contradictory, tasks inherent in multiple affiliative goals, such as building friendship or finding a romantic partner (McArthur & Baron, 1983; Neel & Lassetter, 2019; Neuberg & Schaller, 2014). Accordingly, the present work suggest that similar targets would be viewed differently according to the salient motivational goals: building new friendships or attracting a mate.

Research Overview

Study 1 tested whether similarities in dressing styles are perceived differently by participants in friend-seeking and mate-seeking contexts, and Study 2 asked the same question but focused on styles of humor. As longstanding insight from social psychology suggests, it was predicted that same-sex individuals with similarity would be preferred in non-romantic contexts. However, this research predicts that such preference may be erased, or even reversed, when the salient

goal of the social setting is to attract an opposite-sex romantic partner. In addition to examining the above hypothesis, Study 3 explored whether people's chronic disposition moderates this interpersonal perception pattern. Specifically, Study 3 examined whether chronic concern for interpersonal harmony (high agreeableness) spills over to mating context, and thus, weakens disapproval of a similar other.

Study 1: Similar Dressing Style

Study 1 sought to examine how people perceive same-sex individuals with similar (vs. dissimilar) dressing styles. In particular, dressing styles is known function differently according to the situations, for example, signaling a shared social group or serving as a marker of a unique style. The presence of similarly dressed others would be perceived positively when one is seeking a potential friend (Dunbar, 2018). On the contrary, similar dressing styles would be considered frustrating when one is seeking a romantic mate, as the seeker hopes to stand out through nice clothing and grooming (Bellezza et al., 2014; Buss, 1998). Of note, considering how self-adornment through clothing and makeup are mating tactics particularly important to women (Beall & Tracy, 2013; Elliot et al., 2013; Hudders et al., 2014; Wang & Griskevicius, 2014), a possible sex difference might occur in this study design manipulating similarity in fashion style.

Method

Participants

For a .80 power to detect an interaction of small effect size ($f = .20$), assuming measurement correlation of .5, 76 participants were required. Of 120 TurkPrime participants, 110 participants ($M_{age} = 39.70$, $SD_{age} = 12.66$; 50 female) offered complete answers to key measures and passed attention checks.

Design and procedure

Participants read a scenario in which they were asked to imagine being a member of a running crew. They read, “This evening, the crew-leader invited the members for a home-party. You are very excited because you really want to get close to (motivational goal: a same-sex friend /your crush). As you arrive at the party, unexpectedly, you meet two new members (either two women, Anne and Emma; or, two men, Luke and Jack) who recently joined the running crew. Knowing nothing about them beforehand, you pay close attention to the newcomers and find out that you share some similarity in appearance and fashion style with (similar; Anne or Luke) but not with (dissimilar; Emma or Jack).”

To enhance the strength of the manipulation, participants were asked to pause three times during the scenario reading and write about how they pictured the situation and how they would feel. Participants then rated the two same-sex individuals. Four questions assessed participants’ liking and attitudes toward the same-sex individual who differed in terms of similarity ($\alpha = .96$; e.g., “Do you

think you would like her/him?”, “Do you feel positive about her/him?”) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Additionally, they rated how they would feel if they sat right next to the similar or non-similar target person. Positive emotion was obtained by using two 7-point scale items (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*), “pleased” and “happy” ($\alpha = .96$). Negative emotion items were “frustrated” and “annoyed” ($\alpha = .95$).

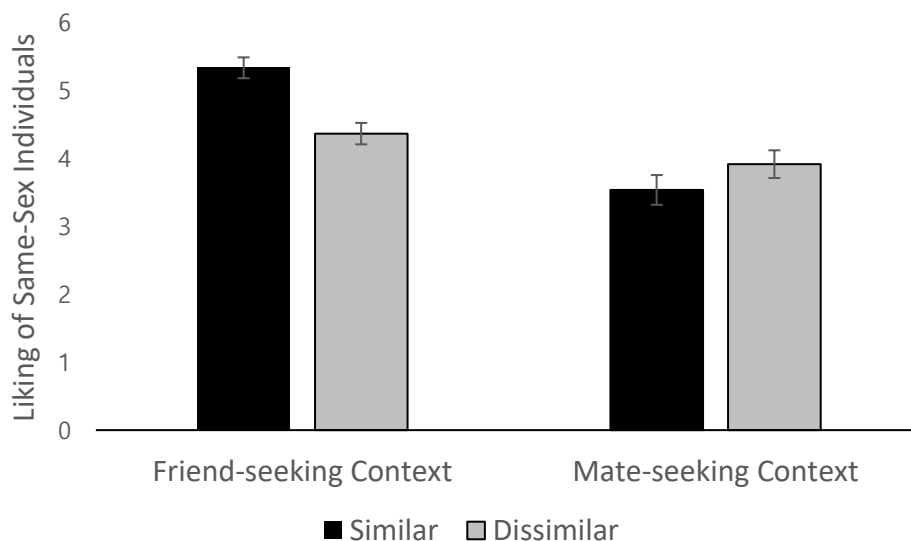
Results

General Liking

A three-way ANOVA with context (friend-seeking, mate-seeking; between subjects) \times similarity (similar, dissimilar targets; within subjects) \times gender (male, female) was conducted. The three-way interaction was not significant, suggesting that the interaction effect of context and similarity level did not differ across gender. There was a main effect of context, $F(1, 106) = 25.86, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .20$, and similarity, $F(1, 106) = 5.34, \eta^2_p = .20$. No main effect of gender was observed, $F(1, 106) = 2.00, p = .15, \eta^2_p = .05$. Critically, a two-way interaction was found between context and similarity, $F(1, 106) = 29.69, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .22$, suggesting that the liking towards the similar (vs. dissimilar) target depended on the motivational context. None of the other two-way interactions were observed ($F < 1, p > .2$ for all).

To probe the interaction between context and similarity, a pairwise paired t-test comparisons with Bonferroni correction was conducted. It revealed that there was a statistically significant effect of similarity on liking for each context (see Figure 1). When the goal was to make a new friend, participants preferred the same-sex target with similar dressing style ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.17$) compared to the target with dissimilar dressing style ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.20$), $t(57) = 5.91$, $p < .001$, $d = .77$. Interestingly, this pattern flipped in the mating context. In the context where participants desired to attract a romantic partner, they liked target with dissimilar dressing style ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.47$) more than the target with similar dressing style ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.58$), $t(51) = -2.11$, $p = .039$, $d = .28$. Thus, it appears that in a mating context, perceived similarity seems to relate negatively with degree of liking for a same-sex target, who might become a potential rival.

Figure 1. General liking of similar and dissimilar same-sex individuals across contexts in Study 1.



Note. Error bars represent SEs.

Anticipated Emotions

Anticipated positive and negative emotions were analyzed separately through a three-way ANOVA (motivational context x similarity x gender). For both analysis on positive and negative emotions, the three-way interactions were not significant, suggesting that the interaction effect of context and similarity on positive and negative emotions did not differ across gender. Critically, a significant two-way interaction was found between context and similarity cue for positive emotions, $F(1, 106) = 39.72, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12$, and also for negative

emotions, $F(1, 106) = 16.21, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .12$. None of the other two-way interactions were significant for both positive and negative emotions ($F < 2.5, p > .1$ for all). The main effect of motivational context was significant for in both positive emotions, $F(1, 106) = 26.22, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .20$, and negative emotions, $F(1, 106) = 27.16, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.20$.

A further examination of this interaction, by paired t-test comparisons with Bonferroni correction, revealed that there was a statistically significant effect of similarity cue on liking for each context Adjusted p-values are reported. In friend-seeking context, participants reported that they would feel happier sitting by a person sharing similar dressing style ($M = 5.37, SD = 1.28$) than sitting by a person with dissimilar dressing style ($M = 4.37, SD = 1.33$), $t(57) = 6.24, p < .001, d = .82$. However, an opposite pattern was found in the mate-seeking context. When attracting a romantic partner was a salient goal, participants reported that they would feel *less* happier sitting by a same-sex person sharing similar dressing style ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.58$), compared to sitting by a person with dissimilar dressing style ($M = 3.98, SD = 1.36$), $t(51) = 3.07, p = .002, d = .43$.

Furthermore, analysis of negative emotions revealed that in friend-seeking context, participants anticipated *less* frustration when imagining sitting by a person with a similar dressing style ($M = 1.66, SD = 1.34$) than the dissimilarly

dressed person ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.51$), $t(57) = 4.05$, $p < .001$, $d = .52$. Rather, in mate-seeking context, participants anticipated *more* frustration sitting by a person with a similar dressing style ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.77$) than the dissimilarly dressed person ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.75$), $t(51) = 1.98$, $p = .053$, $d = .28$.

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial evidence that preference for same-sex others with similar attributes differs across contexts. This study reveals a pattern that goes against a widely accepted idea in social psychology that similarity couples with greater interpersonal liking. In a mate-seeking context, same-sex others with similarity were not preferred at all. The negative reaction for a similar same-sex person was found not only at a general liking level, but also at an emotional level (more annoyed and less pleased).

Furthermore, there was no effect of participants' sex. Although, styling oneself with nice clothes are considered more important to females, when one needs to distinguish oneself from other same-sex rivals, being perceived as "similar" with others might be a disturbing experience to individuals of both sexes. Study 2 attempts to resolve this issue, after manipulating the perceived similarity of self-other in a more psychological domain (humor style).

Study 2: Similar Humor Style

Study 2 attempts to extend the earlier finding to a highly different domain of self-other similarity. Appeal to an opposite-sex person can be made through various means, such as displaying wealth, power, and stylish fashion. In addition to these relatively conspicuous and tangible means, individuals also display various inner, psychological qualities (e.g., courage, knowledge, generosity) that the opposite-sex person may value. One such attribute is the person's sense of humor (Miller, 2000). Sharing jokes and humor is a pleasurable experience that is valued by both prospective friends and romantic partners (Buss, 1998; Dunbar, 2018).

As in Study 1, it was predicted that perceived similarity in joking style between the self and a same-sex individual would increase liking in a non-mating social situation. However, it was expected that such preference towards same-sex individuals will be erased when attracting a romantic partner becomes a salient goal. If predictions are confirmed, they would suggest collectively with Study 1 finding that the current phenomenon is quite robust, occurring across various domains of self-other similarity perceptions (Study 1, dressing style; Study 2, joking style). Notably, females are known to particularly value humor in a mating context (Bressler et al., 2006; Hone et al., 2015). Hence, this study considered the possibility of a sex difference in the results.

Method

Participants

To detect an interaction of small effect size ($f = .20$), 76 participants were required for .80 power, assuming measurement correlation = .5. Among the 112 TurkPrime participants recruited for the study, 99 participants ($M_{age} = 34.59$, $SD_{age} = 7.61$; 56 females) were qualified for the final analyses (completed key measures and passed the attention check items).

Design and procedure

Participants read a scenario about a situation at a party hosted by a Travelers community. They read, “You’ve been excited about this club for a while because you love trips. What makes it better is that you feel like you might make (motivational goal: a same-sex best friend versus a romantic partner) who shares your thoughts. This evening, you got invited to a dinner party from the club leader. At the party, you are pleasantly surprised to meet two newcomers (same sex as the participant) to the club (two women, named Rachel and Claire; or, two men, named Josh and David). You know nothing about them yet, so everyone circles around them for a conversation. Everyone took turns talking about their life and travel stories.” Following this party scene, participants are told that one former club member swings by and says, “Hey, Rachel’s (or Josh’s) stories and jokes are really similar to yours!”

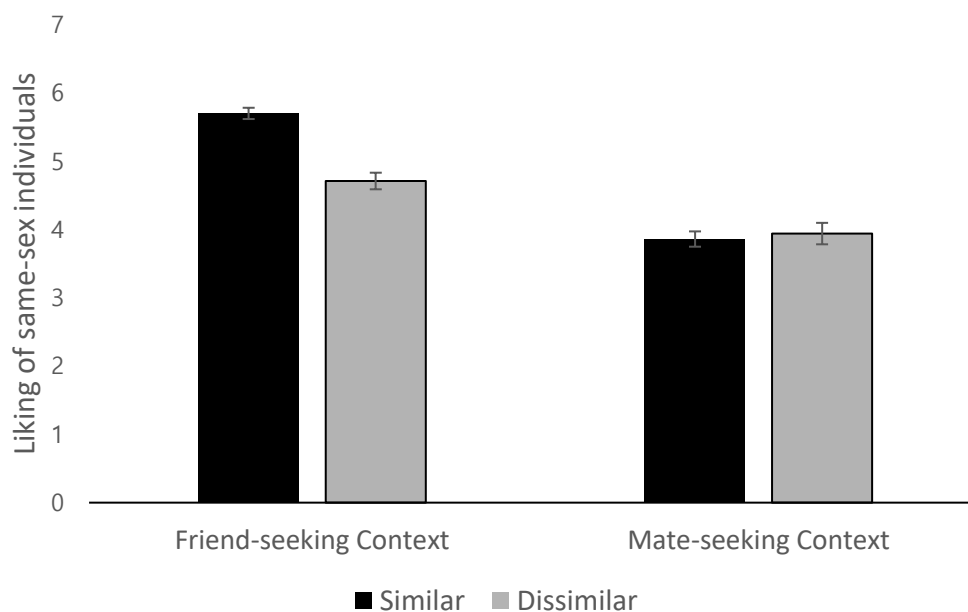
Participants then rated their general level of liking for the two same-sex newcomers, using two items ($\alpha = .95$; e.g., “Do you think you would like her/him?”, “Do you feel positive about her/him?”) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Additionally, they rated how they would feel if the two targets (the similar versus non-similar person) told another story about their trip. They rated how pleased and happy ($\alpha = .97$), and how frustrated and annoyed ($\alpha = .97$) they might feel hearing the story, on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Results

General Liking

The level of general liking was analyzed using a context (friend-seeking, mate-seeking; between subjects) \times similarity (similar, dissimilar targets; within subjects) \times gender (male, female) mixed ANOVA. The three-way interaction was not significant, suggesting that the interaction effect of context and similarity did not differ across gender. There was a main effect of context, $F(1, 95) = 30.01, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .23$, and similarity, $F(1, 95) = 18.65, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .15$. Critically, a two-way ANOVA was found between context and similarity cue, $F(1, 95) = 14.32, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .12$, suggesting that the liking towards the similar (vs. dissimilar) target depended on the motivational context. None of the other two-way interactions were observed ($F < 1, p > .2$ for all).

Figure 2. General liking of similar and dissimilar same-sex individuals across contexts in Study 2.



Note. Error bars represent SEs.

The two interactions were probed further by pairwise paired t-test comparisons with Bonferroni correction. When the prime goal was to make a friend, participants preferred a same-sex target with similar joking styles ($M = 5.70$, $SD = .87$) compared to a target with dissimilar joking styles ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(46) = 5.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.85$. Such preference for the similar target, however, disappeared when the prime goal was to attract a romantic partner. In this context, participants did *not* prefer a same-sex target with similar joking

styles ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.28$) over a target with dissimilar joking styles ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.66$), $t(51) = .46$, $p = .65$.

Anticipated Level of Emotions

Anticipated positive and negative emotions were analyzed separately through a three-way ANOVA (motivational context x similarity x gender). For both analysis on positive and negative emotions, the three-way interactions were not significant, suggesting that the interaction effect of context and similarity on positive and negative emotions did not differ across gender. Critically, a significant two-way interaction was found between context and similarity cue for positive emotions, $F(1, 95) = 23.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .20$, and also for negative emotions, $F(1, 95) = 14.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .12$. None of the other two-way interactions were significant for both emotions ($F < 1$, $p > .1$ for all). A significant main effect of motivational context for positive ($F(1, 95) = 29.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.24$) and negative anticipated emotions ($F(1, 95) = 39.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.28$) were found.

These two interactions were probed further by pairwise paired t-test comparisons with Bonferroni correction (see Table 1). Adjusted p-values are reported. Analysis of positive emotions first revealed that in the friend-seeking context, participants reported that they would feel happier listening a story told by

the similar target ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.28$) than the dissimilar target ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.33$), $t(46) = 4.50$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.66$. However, in mate-seeking context, participants reported that they would feel *less* happier hearing the story told by the similar target ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.58$), compared to the dissimilar target ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(51) = 3.41$, $p = .001$, $d = .46$.

In addition, analysis of negative emotions further revealed that in the friend-seeking context, participants anticipated being *less* frustrated in hearing a story from a person sharing similar ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.31$) than a non-similar style of humor ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(46) = 1.23$, $p = .225$, $d = 0.18$. In the mate-seeking context, however, they anticipated being *more* frustrated in hearing a story from a person sharing similar ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 2.17$) than a non-similar style of humor ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 2.07$), $t(51) = 3.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.53$.

Discussion

Study 2 also supports the hypothesis that the effects of similarity cue on preference judgments may operate differently between mating versus non-mating context. In a mate-seeking context, perceived similarity of joking style was not related with interpersonal liking. In fact, in a mating context, participants thought they would feel more emotional distress (more frustration) if interacting with a same-sex person who is *more* similar to the self in conversational style.

As in Study 1, there was no effect of participants' sex. Although specific mating tactics are known to differ across sex, in a mating context where one needs to stand out and distinguish oneself from other potential rivals (same-sex persons), being perceived as “similar” with others might be a disturbing experience to individuals of both sexes. This point will be discussed further in the "Discussion" section. In sum, the combined results from two studies suggest that perceptions of same-sex others in a competitive intra-sexual context might take a different shape than the common claim that similarity breeds liking. When mating desire is salient, it seems similar others are seen as foes, not friends.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Anticipated Emotions towards interacting with Similar and Dissimilar Same-sex Individuals

<i>Measures</i>	Friend-seeking Context (Study 1 & 2)				Mate-seeking Context			
	Control Condition (Study 3)							
	Similar		Non-similar		Similar		Non-similar	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Study1</i>								
Positive Emotions	5.37	1.28	4.37	1.33	3.38	1.58	3.98	1.36
Negative Emotions	1.66	1.34	2.41	1.51	3.64	1.77	3.14	1.75
Aggregated	3.71	1.88	1.96	2.22	-0.25	2.86	0.837	2.46
<i>Study2</i>								
Positive Emotions	5.64	0.95	5.11	1.31	3.39	2.02	4.17	1.68
Negative Emotions	1.66	1.26	1.86	1.31	4.31	2.17	3.36	2.07
Aggregated	3.98	1.78	3.24	2.20	-0.92	3.91	0.82	3.39
<i>Study3</i>								
Positive Emotions	5.09	1.26	3.82	1.1	4.06	1.33	3.72	1.01
Negative Emotions	2.29	1.26	2.45	1.25	3.57	1.52	2.75	1.26
Aggregated	2.79	2.24	1.37	1.69	0.481	2.61	0.969	1.73

Study 3: Similar Tastes and Strengths

Study 3 sought to conceptually replicate the earlier findings, manipulating self-other similarity through personal characteristics. Also, to clarify interpretation, mate-seeking context was compared against a baseline condition (instead of the previously used friend-seeking context). Again, it was expected that the positive similarity effect found in typical social situations (control condition) may not emerge when the goal is to attract a romantic partner.

One conceptual expansion to Study 3 was an inclusion of a potential moderating variable (trait Agreeableness). Past research has demonstrated that individuals with high levels of agreeableness generally prefer cooperation to competition and seek harmonious relationships with others; while those low in agreeableness show more willingness to engage in competition and assert their self interest in interpersonal conflicts (Caprara et al., 2010; Graziano et al., 2007; Roccas et al., 2002; Matz & Gladstone, 2020). As such, less agreeable individuals might display a particularly strong dislike towards similar others if they appear as intrasexual competitors.

Method

Participants

To detect an interaction of small effect size ($f = .20$), 76 participants were required for .80 power, assuming measurement correlation = .5. Among the 180

university students recruited for the study, 168 participants ($M_{age} = 21.78$, $SD_{age} = 3.04$; 124 females) were qualified for the final analyses (completed key measures and passed the attention check items).

Design and procedure

Participants first filled in a questionnaire on personality traits (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999) and further answered several open-ended questions about their self-perceived merits and characteristics. The questions asked the participants' favorite activity or place that define themselves, and their personal characteristics that distinguishes themselves from other people. Participants' agreeableness score was obtained by averaging the 9 items ($\alpha = .66$; e.g., "Likes to cooperate with others", "Has a forgiving nature") from the BFI agreeableness subscale.

In the next section, participants completed a questionnaire about a hypothetical campus event where university students would have a chance to meet new students. They were told that the event would allow them to interact with other similar (who have characters matching with ones they just wrote) or dissimilar students. Finally, half of the participants were told that the key reason for attending the event was to find a romantic partner (mating condition); those in the control condition were given no further information about the event.

Then participants in both conditions answered two questions assessed participants' liking and attitudes towards the hypothetical person who might be similar or non-similar to the self ($\alpha = .84$; e.g., "Do you think you would like her/him?", "Do you feel positive about her/him?") on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Additionally, they rated how they would feel if the two targets (similar and non-similar) were assigned in the same activity group. In line with Study 1 and 2, positive emotion was also rated by how "pleased" and "happy" they would feel with each target ($\alpha = .80$) and negative emotion was rated by how "frustrated" and "annoyed" they would feel with each target on a 7-point scale ($\alpha = .80$; *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). After completing these measures, participants were debriefed and received credit.

Results

General Liking

General liking was conducted with a 2 context (baseline, mate-seeking condition; between) x 2 similarity (similar, dissimilar; within) mixed-factor ANOVA. This yielded significant main effects of context, $F(1, 166) = 13.52, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .08$, and similarity, $F(1, 166) = 22.65, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .11$, as well as a significant interaction, $F(1, 166) = 13.35, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .06$, suggesting that the preference towards similar individuals depended on the context.

Further examination of this interaction was examined by paired t-test comparisons with Bonferroni correction. In the control condition, participants preferred the same-sex target with similar personal characteristics ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.26$) compared to the non-similar target ($M = 4.32$, $SD = .99$), $t(86) = 6.44$, $p < .001$, $d = .68$. However, when the goal was to meet a romantic partner, participants no longer preferred the similar target ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.41$) over the non-similar person ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(80) = .71$, $p = .46$, $d = .07$. Thus, it appears that in a mating context, the similarity premium found in more typical interpersonal contexts (i.e., control condition) seems to disappear.

Anticipated Emotions

To assess both anticipated positive and negative emotions, a 2 context (control, mate-seeking; between) x 2 similarity (similar, dissimilar; within) mixed-factors ANOVA was conducted. First, two-way ANOVA was conducted for the positive emotions. Results showed significant main effects of context, $F(1, 166) = 16.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .09$, and similarity, $F(1, 166) = 48.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .23$, as well as a significant interaction, $F(1, 166) = 16.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .09$, suggesting that the positive feeling towards perceived similarity depends on the context. Similar patterns were found when two-way ANOVA was conducted to analyze negative emotions. This yielded significant main effects of context, $F(1,$

166) = 22.16, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .12$, and similarity cue, $F(1, 166) = 8.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .051$, as well as a similarity, $F(1, 166) = 17.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .10$, also suggesting that negative feelings towards perceived similarity depended on the motivational context.

These two interactions were probed further by pairwise paired t-test comparisons with Bonferroni correction. Adjusted p-values are reported. In the control condition, participants reported that they would feel happier participating in a group activity with a same-sex person with similar ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.26$) than non-similar characteristics ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.10$), $t(86) = 8.53$, $p < .001$, $d = .90$. However, when attracting a romantic partner was a salient goal, participants reported that they would feel *less* happier working with a similar ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.33$) than non-similar characteristics ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(80) = 1.90$, $p = .061$, $d = .20$.

Analysis of negative emotions revealed that, in the control condition, participants anticipated similar levels of distress, whether interacting with a similar ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.26$) and or a non-similar same-sex person ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.25$), $t(86) = 1.00$, $p = .318$, $d = .11$. In mating context, however, participants anticipated *higher* level of distress participating a group activity with a similar (M

= 3.57, $SD = 1.52$) than with a non-similar person ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(80) = 4.67$, $p < .001$, $d = .52$.

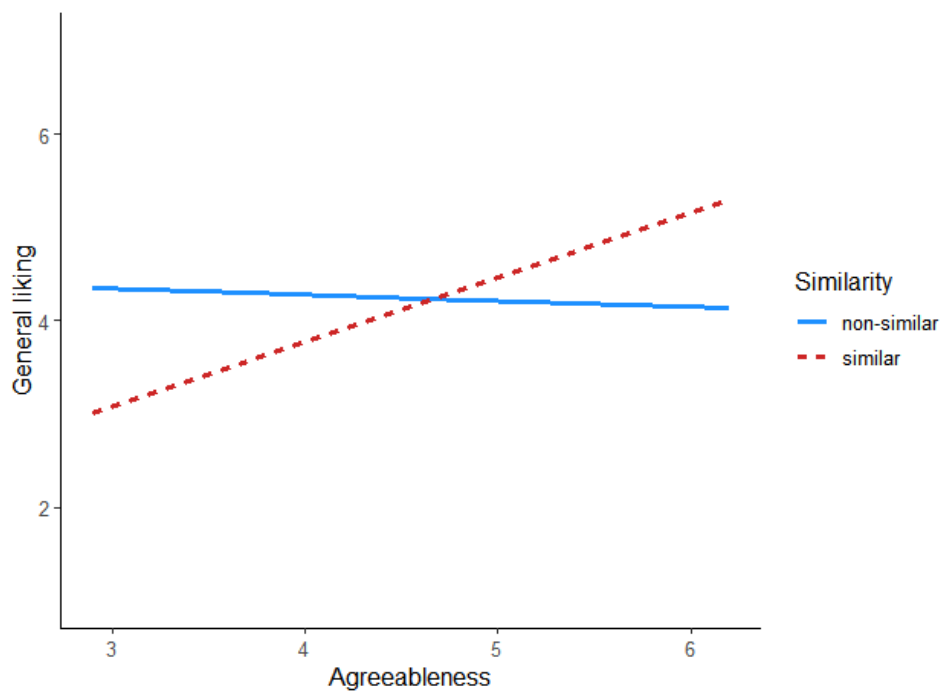
Moderation effect of Agreeableness

In mating context, is the “similar rival” disliked more by some individuals than others? Considering that interpersonal harmony is crucial for highly agreeable people, even in a mating context, such individuals might tone down their negative stance toward a similar same-sex person (who may still offer relationship benefits). In contrast, less agreeable people, who are less concerned with interpersonal conflict and competition, might respond more negatively towards similar same-sex rivals.

First, participants in the mate-seeking context were analyzed. To account for the nested nature of the current data (ratings of similar and non-similar targets were nested within subjects), multilevel modeling was used. Level 1 variables included the target type (0 = non-similar; 1 = similar). Level 2 variables included individual differences in agreeableness, and the two-way interactions among variables. Results showed that there was a significant interaction between agreeableness and the target type (see Figure 3), suggesting that the dislike for a similar other was driven strongly by participants with low agreeableness, $\gamma = .64$, $t(81) = 3.21$, $p = .016$, 95% CI [.29, 1.22]. When a similar analysis was performed for participants in the control condition, no significant effect was observed, γ

$= .23, t(85) = 1.03, p = .28, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.20, .62]$. This suggests that agreeableness did not moderate the liking towards similar and non-similar peers when there was no competition.

Figure 3. Low agreeableness was linked to decreased liking towards similar but not towards dissimilar same-sex targets in mate-seeking context.



Discussion

Study 3 again supports the finding that the effects of similarity on interpersonal judgment may operate differently between mating versus non-mating context. Preference for similar targets were found only in the control, but not in the mating condition. When the prominent goal was to attract a mate, participants responded with more negativity (more irritated and less pleased) when interacting with a same-sex person if s/he was *more* similar the self. Interestingly, people responded differently to the potential competitor, depending on their personality. Dislike towards similar others was especially prominent among those with low levels of agreeableness. It appears that, even in a mating context, individuals valuing harmony and avoid conflict hold a lenient view toward a similar other who may still offer friendship.

General Discussion

Studies 1–3 set out to explore whether perception of similarity is judged differently in mate-seeking versus non-romantic, affiliating context. In common affiliating contexts, participants preferred the same-sex target with similar features as the self (dressing style, Study 1; style of humor, Study 2). In a mate-seeking context, however, this well-established effect did not occur, and sometimes even yielded a reverse pattern. When the goal was to attract a potential mate, people expressed more frustration if they had to interact with a same-sex target with (vs.

without) similar attributes. In addition to replication, Study 3 further found that the dislike of similar others in a mating context was especially pronounced among less agreeable individuals. Taken together, the results show that the effect of similarity on attractiveness hinge on the nature of the social context. When distinguishing oneself from same-sex others have greater payoff than blending in, similarity no longer seems to increase attractiveness.

Although traditional approaches to person perception have often focused on general features of liking (e.g., similarity, familiarity, proximity), a recurring suggestion is that the field should move beyond these overly general constructs and consider more fully the various nuances embodied in the situation (Lassetter & Neel, 2021; McArthur & Baron, 1983; Neel & Lassetter, 2019; Neuberg & Schaller, 2014; Park & Schaller, 2005; Pirlott & Cook, 2018). Following this advice, the current research examined the possible *cost* of interpersonal similarity that may take place in a relatively overlooked social context—mating. The well-known preference for similarity was repeatedly *not* found across three experiments, when a similar peer was framed as a potential rival in the process of attaining a romantic partner (Dunbar, 2018; Lieberman et al., 2007).

The present finding also support and expands intrasexual competition research (Krems et al., 2019). Past work reports that females show increased vigilance towards physically attractive females, and males feel competition at the

sight of a masculine, high power male (Maner et al., 2005; Wilson & Daly, 1985). It is found that people use a wide variety of different tactics when facing such threatening targets (Vaillancourt, 2013, Krems et al., 2016). Although the specific risks posed by competitors may differ for men and women (Bleske & Shackelford, 2001), the current work finds one factor that may be disturbing for both—the presence of a same-sex person who appears to be “similar” to the self. This relatively understudied factor (self-other similarity) may generate new ideas for intrasexual competition research that has concentrated heavily on physical attractiveness and status.

Although our studies demonstrate the different consequences of similarity perception across contexts, several points should be considered in future work. First, our findings from controlled scenario-methods are limited in terms of real-life generalizability. As interpersonal perception is designed to process information in a much more complex, dynamic social environment, various factors missing in the current analysis (e.g., age, ethnicity) are likely to play interactive roles in shaping the perception of the target (Gibson, 1979; Lassetter et al., 2021). Furthermore, in real life, people might not only share overlapping characteristics but also momentary experiences (I-sharing; Pinel et al., 2006). Because shared experience is less discernable to others, future research could

examine whether individuals may feel more threatened by signs of observable (vs. less observable) characteristics when trying to distinguish themselves from others.

In addition, according to the present research, individuals of both sexes reacted similarly (negatively) towards same-sex individuals with similar attributes. Being visible to a prospective partner is important to both sexes, and therefore, both sexes may feel threatened when their uniqueness is erased by a rival. Still, the possibility of sex difference cannot be completely ruled out. In real life, for example, women might *frequently* monitor intrasexual competitors that threaten their unique looks than men (Krems et al., 2019). Perhaps also the common behavioral repertoires used to disparage uncomfortably similar others may differ between the two sexes. It seems worthy to examine, for instance, if men employ more confronting actions against a similar target, whereas women seek more passive tactics, such as choosing to gossip about the target behind their back.

Lastly, an additional question that awaits future investigation is about cultural differences. For instance, in collectivistic cultures where uniformity is valued more than uniqueness, individuals might be surrounded by similar others more often. This may increase stress and vigilance in mate-seeking context, but at the same time, expressions of negativity might be especially costly in such harmony-oriented cultures (Cohen & Gunz, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

How do different cultural members regulate their tension of seeing an uncomfortably similar other in a mating context? Such cross-cultural questions will be exciting to probe.

Conclusion

One firm conclusion in social psychology is that people prefer others who have similar characteristics as themselves. The current study demonstrated that this is not always the case. Interpersonal perceptions are shaped by the potential opportunities and threats others might pose. When the goal is to attract a mate, people seem to construe signs of self-other similarity more as a threat than an opportunity.

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Method Reveals Personality Similarity Among Couples and Friends.

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ABSTRACT IN KOREAN

유사성의 역효과: 연애 맥락에서 자신과 유사한 동성 경쟁자에 대한 호감도 감소

본 연구에서는 자신과 유사성을 지닌 동성에 대한 호감도가 맥락에 따라 달라지는 지를 알아보았다. 구체적으로, 연애 맥락에서 상대를 유혹하고 싶은 경우, 자신과 비슷한 동성에 대해서는 호감도가 떨어질 거라는 가설을 세웠다. 연구 1은 연애 맥락이 아닌 상황에서는, 자신과 유사한 스타일로 꾸민 동성에 대한 호감도가 그렇지 않은 동성보다 높았다. 하지만, 연애 맥락에서 이성을 유혹하고 싶은 상황에서는, 자신과 유사한 스타일로 꾸민 동성에 대한 호감도가 떨어졌다. 이는 연구 2와 3에서, 유머 스타일에서의 유사성과 개인적인 매력에서의 유사성을 이용하여 검증하였을 때도 비슷한 결과를 보였다. 추가로, 연구 3에서는 개인이 가지고 있는 동의성 (Agreeableness)에 따라 비슷한 동성에 대한 호감도가 어떻게 조절되는 지 알아보았다. 동의성이 낮을수록, 동성 경쟁자에 대한 호감도 판단이 더 부정적으로 나타났다. 전반적으로, 본 연구는 유사한 상대에 대한 호감도 판단이 맥락에 따라 달라질 수 있다는 점을

보여주며, 유사성과 호감도의 관계는 여러 사회적인 상황에서 검증할 필요가 있다는 점을 시사한다.

핵심어: 유사성, 호감도 판단, 동성 간 경쟁, 진화심리학