woman was stylishly dressed and looked very attractive; in another condition she wore no makeup, an unattractive wig, and ill-fitting clothes. Half of the participants were led to believe that the man and woman were strangers who just happened to be sitting together, whereas the other half were led to believe they were romantically involved. Afterward, the participants indicated their overall impression of the man. Consistent with the notion that people gain socially by associating with beautiful people, Figure 11.8 shows that the man was judged most favorably when he was romantically linked to an attractive woman. Follow-up research has found that a similar, though weaker tendency characterizes same-sex friendships (Kernis & Wheeler, 1981).

3. Gender Differences in Interpersonal Attraction

The preference for attractive interaction partners is a general one. It occurs for platonic relationships as well as for romantic ones, and for same-sex friendships as well as for mixed-sex friendships. The effect is strongest, however, when heterosexual men seek a romantic partner. For example, when asked what qualities they desire in a mate, men rate physical attractiveness more highly than women do (D. M. Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994). In contrast, women value a mate’s status, earning potential, and education more highly than men do (Feingold, 1992b; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). In short, many men view women as “sex objects,” while many women view men as “success objects.”

Social exchange theory can explain gender differences in interpersonal attraction. In most societies, men occupy positions of higher status and wealth than women do. Consequently, they are able to exchange their social status for a woman’s attractiveness. Women, in contrast, have traditionally held positions of lower social status and wealth. Consequently, they trade their attractiveness to acquire these commodities (Gangestad, 1993). These trade-offs can explain why wealthy, older men are sometimes seen with young, attractive women (and why wealthy, older women are sometimes seen with young, attractive men) (Caporael, 1989). As one observer wryly noted, “A proposal of marriage in our society tends to be a way in which a man sums up his social