

Transgender Friendship Profiles: Patterns Across Gender Identity and LGBT Affiliation

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Abstract The present study explores the close friendship patterns of transgender individuals by considering the role of gender identity (trans men, trans women, non-binary) and LGBT affiliation (affiliated, non-affiliated) on friends' identities. Participants were 495 transgender individuals who completed a questionnaire reporting their identities as well as the identities of their close friends. Friendship patterns were explored based on the number of friends who identified as transgender/cisgender, sexual minority/heterosexual, and LGBT affiliated/non-affiliated. Overall, participants reported more cisgender (vs. transgender) friends and more sexual minority (vs. heterosexual friends), suggesting that the majority of their friendships are experienced in a cross-gender identity context. However, important friendship patterns were distinguished across LGBT affiliation and gender identity of the participant. Trans participants who were LGBT affiliated (vs. non-affiliated) reported more transgender friends, more sexual minority friends, and more LGBT affiliated friends. With regard to gender identity, trans men reported more sexual minority and more LGBT affiliated friends when compared to trans women. In addition, trans women reported more non-affiliated friends than both trans men and non-binary individuals. Discussion focuses on the implications of the findings regarding the distinct experiences of trans individuals across gender identity and the common assumptions behind research that frames transgender experience within the larger LGBT community.

Keywords Transgender · Gender identity · Friendship · LGBT community

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Introduction

The present research is a descriptive study investigating the close friendship patterns of transgender¹ individuals to better understand the social context of these adult friendships. This research considers whether transgender individuals who do, and do not, feel connected to the larger lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community differ in their categorical choices of friendship. We also explore whether friendship patterns differ across gender identity (trans men, trans women, non-binary). Participants completed a friendship profile questionnaire which involved reporting their identities (e.g. gender identity, sexual orientation) and the identities of their close friends.

Framing an Understanding of Transgender Friendship: Homophily and Gender

Friendships are conceptualized as distinct from other types of social relationships because they are constructed around mutuality [45] and equality [65]. Close friendships are characterized by interaction and mutual affection, as well as an exchange of benefits, not always received by casual friends or acquaintances [37, 62]. Friendships are also characterized by homophily, which is the idea that people connect with others who are similar to themselves. The tendency toward homophily often serves as the foundation of social relationships [44]. Homophily in relationships, particularly friendships, suggests choosing companions based on commonalities with regard to gender, age, race, and social economic status [15, 55, 61], as well as sexual orientation [25, 34, 42, 70].

Gender is one of the most pervasive social constructs and is one of the first identities we learn [16]. Despite the fact that most individuals experience some flexibility in gender roles and presentation, binary distinctions based on gender/sex² (e.g. girl/boy, woman/man) have been conceptually naturalized. Gender identity is often understood as an individual's internal sense of themselves³ as male, female, both, or neither [66, 67]. Cisgender and transgender are terms that are used to reference the relationship between an individual's current gender identity and their assigned sex at birth. While cisgender individuals identify with their sex assigned at birth, transgender individuals understand their gender identity as something other than their sex assigned at birth [67].

Transgender identities often complicate binary assumptions of gender/sex. While some transgender identities can be conceptualized in binary ways (i.e. where *trans men* move from female to male experience; and *trans women* from male to female), some transgender individuals experience their gender in *non-binary* and/or fluid

¹ We use transgender or trans as an umbrella term to refer to individuals who identify as transgender, transsexual, gender non-conforming, or have a transgender history or status. Transgender individuals are individuals whose gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth.

² Following [71, 72] we use gender/sex to reference a concept that cannot be understood as solely biologically or socially constructed.

³ We use the singular they/them as gender inclusive pronouns.

ways [19, 31, 56]. Homophily in friendships and social networks based on gender has been well documented [13, 35, 44]. This research, however, has assumed cisgender experience and little is known about how friendship networks are organized among transgender individuals. Even less is known about how friendship patterns might differ across transgender identity (i.e. trans men, trans women, non-binary individuals). Such work may add to a more nuanced understanding of how friendships are simultaneously impacted by normative assumptions of cisgender experience and binary assumptions of gender/sex [54].

Framing an Understanding of Transgender Friendship: LGBT Community and Minority Stress

Research regarding transgender friendships is limited and has largely explored these relationships from the lens of the collective LGBT community experience. Friendships for sexual and gender minorities have increased importance as friendship is emphasized during times of social change and when identities are at odds with social norms [74]. LGBT friendships are characterized as social networks that comprise larger LGBT communities [18, 69] and function as a type of familial support often absent from families of origin [47, 49, 75]. The central importance of the LGBT community for sexual and gender minorities can be understood in the colloquial use of the term “family” to refer to individuals who identify within the LGBT community. These friendships function as a type of voluntary kin [10] where family is defined beyond genetic and legal connections, emphasizing mutual and reciprocal selection.

LGB friendships have been studied with regard to homophily [25, 34, 42, 70] but are often conceptualized in the literature as being created and maintained, at least in part, in response to stigma and stress. The minority stress model [22, 46] suggests that individuals with minority identities experience two types of stress. Distal stress includes overt experiences of prejudice and harassment while proximal stress is more subjective and sensitive to internal processes related to identity, rumination, and self-stigma. The negative mental health outcomes associated with minority stress has been well documented for both sexual [43] and gender [8, 9] minorities. Recent research has conceptualized a connection to LGBT community as one of several positive aspects of LGB [58] and transgender [57, 60] identity. Relatedly, research on within community friendships has emphasized their role in protecting against the stigma and stress associated with being a sexual [6, 23, 50, 64] or gender minority [26] identity.

Although sexual (i.e. LGB) and gender (i.e. transgender) minorities are often conceptualized as a unified community based on shared stigma and gender non-conformity, this umbrella grouping is not without its limitations. Transgender persons often experience increased stigma [76], a unique form of anti-transgender prejudice [38, 48], and do not always feel connected to the LGBT community [21]. In addition, transgender concerns have historically been minimized within the larger LGBT community where issues surrounding sexual orientation and LGB experience often take precedent [38].

There is a general failure of researchers to treat gender identity and sexual orientation as independent constructs [21] or to systematically explore the intersection of the two [27]. The routine conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity distorts our understanding of transgender experience. In particular, when the study of gender identity is combined with sexual orientation, the heterogeneity of the transgender experience is underexplored.

Cross-Category Friendships and LGB Friendship Patterns

Although research on friendships of LGB individuals have emphasized homophily and community, cross-category friendships are common. Cross-category friendships exist between individuals who have differing social identities (e.g. cross-gender or cross-orientation) and are considered less common, and develop despite significant obstacles [7, 52]. As cross-category friendships are structured around inequality [52] they invite both parties to consider different perspectives, especially with regard to issues of social identity and inequality [33]. Cross-category friendships are particularly common for social minorities and require a negotiation of minority status within the friendships [25].

Galupo [24, 25] explored friendship patterns among LGB individuals and found distinct patterns of friendships across sex, sexual orientation, and race. Sexual minority individuals reported having more cross-orientation (vs. same-orientation) friendships overall. Although sexual minorities may have more cross-category friendships, these friendships often exist at the expense of their identity. For LGB individuals, cross-orientation friendships are related to increased distal stress where the friendship is often maintained despite experiencing consistent judgment or misunderstanding regarding their identity [28, 32]. On the other hand, cross-orientation friendships have been associated with lower proximal stress in the form of internalized stigma [2].

Sexual minority individuals also report more same-gender (vs. cross-gender) friendships, with gay men reporting more cross-gender friends than did lesbians. This same pattern has been seen in both close [24] and best [3] friendships. In addition, Baiocco et al. [3] found that gay men with female best friends reported lower levels of social anxiety. More recently, Gillespie et al. [34] explored LGB friendship patterns that considered the number of friendships that function in expressive, instrumental, and companionate ways and found less evidence for gender differences in sexual minority friendship patterns. It is clear that cross-category friendship patterns among cisgender LGB individuals are impacted by a number of variables including sexual orientation and gender. It makes sense, then, that transgender friendship patterns may be similarly shaped.

Transgender Friendships

Friendship research on social minorities has recently expanded to include transgender individuals. Research has focused on the both the positive and negative roles friendships can play in identity formation and disclosure for transgender individuals [1, 26, 29, 30, 40, 41, 51, 79]

In a study of transgender friendships Galupo et al. [26] found that the barriers and benefits of friendship differed based on the sexual orientation and gender identity of the friend [26]. Transgender individuals found different types of support in their friendships with heterosexual cisgender, LGB cisgender, and transgender friends. Although there were some unique characteristics in friendships with other transgender individuals (e.g. comfort in feeling fully themselves, able to discuss trans issues, finding mentorship and support) many of the findings drew distinctions between friendships within and outside of the larger LGBT community. Thus, understanding transgender friendship patterns with transgender/cisgender, sexual minority/heterosexual and LGBT affiliated/non-affiliated friends may provide insight into the types of support transgender individuals are most likely to find within their friendship network.

It has been suggested that LGBT friendship patterns can be understood as more than just a matter of availability or demographics; rather friendship patterns and experiences across sexual orientation are shaped by larger sociocultural attitudes and sexual prejudice [23, 25]. Similarly, it is likely that further research considering transgender friendship patterns across LGBT community affiliation and gender identity might produce an understanding of the ways anti-transgender prejudice and binary expectations of gender intersect to shape friendship choices.

Present Study

Past LGB friendship research has used number of friends across different identities [3, 24, 25] and across gendered function [34] to frame an understanding of sexual minority friendship patterns. For sexual minority individuals, the number of cross-orientation [2] and cross-gender [3] friends have been tied to both positive mental health/well-being outcomes. For the present research, the number of friends of different identities will be used as dependent variables (based on gender identity, sexual orientation, and connection to LGBT community) in order to explore close friendship patterns of transgender individuals in the United States.

The purpose of this research was to: (1) explore differences and similarities in friendship patterns across gender identity (trans men, trans women, non-binary) and LGBT community affiliation (affiliated, non-affiliated); and (2) develop friendship profiles by exploring the number of friends reported with the following identities: transgender, cisgender, sexual minority, heterosexual, LGBT affiliated, non-affiliated. When investigating the friendship profiles of transgender individuals, we explore two sets of hypotheses: one set related to participants' connection to the LGBT community and one set related to participants' gender identity.

Transgender individuals do not unanimously consider themselves to be a part of the larger LGBT community [20, 21]. In addition, transgender friendship dynamics shift based on friends' identity and connectedness to the LGBT community [26, 54]. We predicted that transgender individuals who are affiliated with the LGBT community, when compared to non-affiliated individuals will have (a) more transgender friends; (b) more sexual minority friends; and (c) more friends who are also affiliated with the LGBT community.

Among cisgender individuals it has been well documented that gender differences exist in terms of who men and women are likely to count as friends. It makes sense, then, that gender may also shape the friendship profiles for transgender individuals. Gender differences have been documented in transgender developmental trajectories and these could potentially impact friendship profiles for trans men and trans women. Trans men often report self-identifying first as lesbian as a milestone in their transgender development, but a gay male identity is not typically experienced as a milestone for trans women [5]. Based on these differences we predicted that trans men would have more sexual minority and LGBT affiliated friends when compared to trans women.

Because there is limited research on the social and friendship experiences of non-binary trans individuals to guide hypotheses, comparisons with non-binary individuals are largely exploratory. However, Factor and Rothblum [19] have reported that genderqueer (non-binary) trans individuals feel more connected to the LGB community than do trans women and trans men. Based on their findings we predicted that non-binary trans individuals would have more sexual minority and LGBT affiliated friends than trans men and women.

Method

Participants and Recruitment

Participants included 495 individuals who self-identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. The research requirements included identification as transgender or gender non-conforming, an age of 18 or older, current residence in the United States, and voluntary consent for their participation. Tables 1 and 2 provide demographic information of the participants related to gender/sex and sexual orientation. With regard to gender identity, participants self-identified as 41.4% male, 35.4% female, 15.9% gender nonconforming, 7.3% bigender. For the purposes of analyses we collapsed gender non-conforming and bigender together in a non-binary group, allowing for analyses across participant gender identity (trans men, trans women, non-binary). Participant age ranged from 18 to 77 ($M = 36.93$, $SD = 15.97$). Participants were disproportionately white, middle class, and well-educated (See Table 3).

Measures and Procedure

The study used a survey format, which was hosted through SurveyMonkey.com. Participants were recruited from various transgender listservs and online message boards (e.g. Trans-Academics, FtM Trans) with a link to the online survey. The survey was distributed to local transgender communities, as well as online resources that reached a national population. Additionally, the researchers used Facebook and other forms of social media intended to reach transgender individuals.

On the first page of the survey, participants agreed to the stated requirements of the study and were informed that they could discontinue participation at any time.

Table 1 Demographics: LGBT affiliation means

	LGBT affiliated (<i>n</i> = 386) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Non-affiliated (<i>n</i> = 109) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Trans identity		
Male	162 (42%)	43 (39.4%)
Female	131 (33.9%)	44 (40.4%)
Non-Binary	93 (24.1%)	22 (20.2%)
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	63 (16.3%)	31 (28.4%)
Bisexual	60 (15.5%)	30 (27.5%)
Lesbian/gay	82 (21.2%)	18 (16.5%)
Questioning	23 (6%)	14 (12.8%)
Queer/pansexual/fluid	158 (40.9%)	16 (14.7%)
Age	36.61(15.83)	38.07(16.47)

Table 2 Demographic information by trans identity

	Gender identity		
	Trans men (<i>n</i> = 205)	Trans women (<i>n</i> = 175)	Non-binary (<i>n</i> = 115)
Sex assigned at birth			
Female	188 (91.7%)	5 (2.9%)	71 (61.7%)
Male	16 (7.8%)	161 (92%)	39 (33.9%)
Intersex	1 (.5%)	9 (5.1%)	5 (4.3%)
Gender raised			
Female	188 (91.7%)	6 (3.4%)	71 (61.7%)
Male	17 (8.3%)	169 (96.6%)	44 (38.3%)
Sexual orientation			
Heterosexual	53 (25.9%)	32 (18.3%)	9 (7.8%)
Bisexual	20 (9.8%)	47 (26.9%)	23 (20%)
Lesbian/gay	35 (17.1%)	50 (28.6%)	15 (13%)
Questioning	10 (4.9%)	19 (10.9%)	8 (7%)
Queer/pansexual/fluid	87 (42.4%)	27 (15.4%)	60 (52.2%)

All participants self-identified as being transgender and also self-selected into one of four categories that best fit their experience: trans men, trans women, gender variant, or bi-gender. Researchers then combined the last two identity groups to comprise the non-binary group

Participants complete a friendship questionnaire developed by the second/senior author reporting their identities and the identities of up to eight of their closest friends (range 0–8). Participants were asked to include who they consider to be “close friends” based on their own personal definition. Because the literature suggests that LGBT individuals define friend in broader terms than do cisgender/

Table 3 Participant demographics

	Total (<i>N</i> = 495)
Age mean (SD)	36.93 (15.97)
Race/ethnicity (%)	
White/non-hispanic	84.2
Black/African American	4.2
Hispanic	2.8
Asian/Asian–American	1.6
Native American	1.2
Other	5.9
Socio-economic status (%)	
Working class	34.9
Middle class	41.4
Upper-middle class	21.0
Upper class	2.6
Education level	
High school/GED	7.7
Vocational school	3.2
Associate’s degree	6.5
Some college	29.7
Bachelor’s degree	23.2
Advanced degree	22.1
Other	7.5

heterosexual individuals [47, 49, 75] no standardized definition for “close friend” was given to participants. Participant and friend identities were reported via categorical options for each of the following categories: sex assigned at birth (male, female, intersex); gender raised (boy/girl); current gender identity (trans man, trans woman, gender variant, bigender); sexual orientation (heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian/gay, questioning, queer/pansexual/fluid); connection to LGBT community (yes/no); social class (working, middle, upper-middle, upper); and race (White/non-Hispanic, Black/African American, Hispanic, Asian/Asian–American, Native American, Other). In order to characterize participants’ pattern of friendships, a friendship profile was developed using the total number of close friends. In addition, the total number of transgender/cisgender, sexual minority/heterosexual friends were considered, as were the total number of LGBT affiliated/non-LGBT affiliated friends.

Results

Participants’ mean number of close friendships was 5.90 ($SD = 2.58$). A preliminary ANOVA revealed no significant main effects or interaction effects for gender identity and LGBT affiliation on the total number of close friendships

reported by participants. Table 4 provides a summary of overall transgender friendship patterns indicating the number of friends disaggregated by gender identity (transgender/cisgender friends), sexual orientation (sexual minority/heterosexual) and LGBT affiliation (affiliated/non-affiliated). Overall, participants reported significantly more cisgender ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 2.22$) than transgender ($M = 1.21$, $SD = 1.49$) friends, and more sexual minority ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.99$) than heterosexual friends ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.76$). There was no overall difference in the number of LGBT affiliated versus non-affiliated friends.

A 3 (gender identity: trans men, trans women, non-binary) X 2 (LGBT affiliation: affiliated/not-affiliated) multivariate analysis of variance, covarying the number of friends, was used to develop friendship profiles. Six dependent variables included the number of (a) transgender friends; (b) cisgender friends; (c) sexual minority friends; (d) heterosexual friends; (e) LGBT affiliated friends; and (f) non-affiliated friends. Family-wise alpha adjustments were used for analyses across gender identity (transgender, cisgender), sexual orientation (sexual minority, heterosexual), and LGBT affiliation (LGBT affiliated/non-affiliated) of friends. In cases where there was a main effect of gender identity, pairwise post hoc Bonferroni t tests explored differences among trans men, trans women, and non-binary individuals.

No interaction effects for gender identity and LGBT affiliation were seen for any of the analyses. Tables 5 and 6 summarize the significant main effects for LGBT affiliation and gender identity, respectively, across all analyses.

Friendships with Transgender and Cisgender Individuals

A multivariate analysis of covariance revealed that there was no significant interaction of gender identity (trans men, trans women, non-binary) and LGBT community affiliation, $F(2, 487) = .56$, $p = .57$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$, for number of transgender friends. Analysis revealed a main effect of LGBT affiliation, where those affiliated ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 1.55$) reported more transgender friends than those who were not ($M = .62$, $SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 487) = 11.69$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. There was no main effect of gender identity for transgender friends, $F(2, 487) = 2.15$, $p = .12$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$.

There was no significant interaction of gender identity and LGBT community affiliation $F(2, 487) = 2.04$, $p = .13$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$ for number of cisgender friends. There was no main effect of LGBT community affiliation $F(1, 487) = 2.71$, $p = .10$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$ for number of cisgender friends. There was a significant

Table 4 Transgender friendship patterns

	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> test	<i>p</i> value
Transgender friends	1.21 (1.49)	Cisgender friends	3.42 (2.22)	17.23	<.001
Sexual minority friends	2.66 (1.99)	Heterosexual friends	2.22 (1.76)	3.23	<.001
LGBT affiliated friends	2.39 (2.05)	Non-affiliated friends	2.49 (1.88)	.70	Not sig

Table 5 Main effects of LGBT affiliation

	LGBT affiliated <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	LGBT Non-affiliated <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Transgender friends*	1.38 (1.55)	.62 (1.03)
Sexual minority friends*	2.92 (2.01)	1.73 (1.64)
Heterosexual friends*	2.14 (1.71)	2.49 (1.92)
LGBT affiliated friends*	2.84 (2.03)	.83 (1.12)
LGBT non-affiliated friends*	2.24 (1.69)	3.39 (2.21)

* All significant at the $p < .05$ level

Table 6 Main effects of gender identity

	Trans men <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Trans women <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Non-binary <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Cisgender friends ^a	3.72 (2.07)	3.11 (2.33)	3.37 (2.67)
Sexual minority friends ^a	2.93 (1.92)	2.42 (2.03)	2.54 (2.01)
LGBT affiliated friends ^a	2.68 (2.09)	2.04 (1.93)	2.42 (2.07)
LGBT non-affiliated friends ^b	2.27 (1.71)	2.93 (2.06)	2.22 (1.77)

^a Significant differences: trans men versus trans women

^b Significant differences: trans women versus trans men and non-binary

^{a,b} All significant at the $p < .05$ level

main effect of gender identity, $F(2, 487) = 5.15, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, where trans men ($M = 3.72, SD = 2.07$) reported significantly more cisgender friends than trans women ($M = 3.11, SD = 2.33$).

Friendships with Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Individuals

A multivariate analysis of covariance revealed no significant interaction of gender identity (trans men, trans women, non-binary) and LGBT community affiliation, $F(2, 487) = .30, p = .74$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$, on number of sexual minority friends. Analysis revealed a main effect of LGBT affiliation, where those affiliated ($M = 2.92, SD = 2.01$) reported more sexual minority friends than those who were not ($M = 1.73, SD = 1.64$), $F(1, 487) = 15.92, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. There was a significant main effect of gender identity, $F(2, 487) = 3.55, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, where trans men ($M = 2.93, SD = 1.92$) reported significantly more sexual minority friends than did trans women ($M = 2.42, SD = 2.03$).

There was no significant interaction of gender identity and LGBT community affiliation $F(2, 487) = .28, p = .75$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$, on number of heterosexual friends. Analysis revealed a main effect of LGBT affiliation, where participants who were affiliated ($M = 2.14, SD = 1.71$) reported fewer heterosexual friends than participants who were not ($M = 2.49, SD = 1.92$), $F(1, 487) = 12.5, p < .05$,

partial $\eta^2 = .03$. There was no main effect of gender identity for number of heterosexual friends $F(2, 487) = 1.91, p = .15$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$.

Friendships Within and Outside of the LGBT Community

A multivariate analysis of covariance revealed no significant interaction of gender identity (trans men, trans women, non-binary) and LGBT community affiliation $F(2, 487) = .72, p = .49$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$ on number of LGBT affiliated friends. Analysis revealed a main effect of LGBT affiliation, where those affiliated ($M = 2.84, SD = 2.03$) reported more LGBT affiliated friends than those who were not ($M = .83, SD = 1.12$), $F(1, 487) = 88.24, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$. There was a significant main effect of gender identity, $F(2, 487) = 5.69, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, where trans men ($M = 2.68, SD = 2.09$) reported significantly more LGBT affiliated friends than did trans women ($M = 2.04, SD = 1.93$).

There was no significant interaction of gender identity and LGBT community affiliation $F(2, 487) = .19, p = .83$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$ on total number of non-affiliated friends. Analysis revealed a main effect of LGBT affiliation, where those affiliated ($M = 2.24, SD = 1.69$) reported fewer non-affiliated friends than those who were not ($M = 3.39, SD = 2.21$), $F(1, 487) = 65.93, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$. There was a significant main effect of gender identity, $F(2, 487) = 3.59, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, where trans women ($M = 2.93, SD = 2.06$) reported significantly more non-affiliated friends than did trans men ($M = 2.27, SD = 1.71$) and non-binary individuals ($M = 2.22, SD = 1.77$).

Discussion

Transgender experience has been largely framed in the research using the minority stress model [22, 46]. This research has simultaneously focused on elucidating the consequences of stigma for transgender individuals as well as identifying protective factors and resilience [4, 8, 9, 63, 68]. Paradoxically, friendships for trans individuals can be a site of bias and stress [12, 29] and also serve as a protective buffer against minority stress [26, 51].

Given that trans individuals are often marginalized from traditional social support systems, friends enjoy an expanded role in their lives as chosen family/voluntary kin, role models, and counselors [26, 39]. It is noteworthy, then, that it is more distressing for trans individuals when bias and prejudice (in the form of microaggressions) are received from friends versus a stranger or acquaintance [12, 29]. Previous research has demonstrated that the type of support trans individuals receive from friends varies according to the friend's identity, as does the type of obstacles and bias they might face within the friendship [26, 29]. The present research focused on describing the friendship patterns of transgender individuals. Understanding who transgender individuals count among their friends provides insight into the type of support they are likely to receive in their social and personal relationships.

Although our findings suggest that gender identity and LGBT affiliation do shape friendship patterns in important ways, two overall findings should be noted before considering the implications of group differences. First, our transgender participants (regardless of identity or connection to the LGBT community) reported more cisgender (vs. transgender) friends. This suggests that transgender individuals experience the majority of their friendships in a cross-gender identity context. Transgender friendships with cisgender friends have unique benefits and barriers [26, 29] that are framed around the negotiation of gender identity difference between friends. Consistent with research on dynamics within other cross-category friendships [53], the burden and responsibility for bridging identity differences largely falls on the friend with a minority identity (in this case, the transgender individual). In addition, overall transgender friendship patterns emphasized sexual minority (vs. heterosexual) friends. While transgender friendships with LGB individuals can also be characterized by having unique barriers and stressors [26], these friendships are often organized around commonalities and community.

Second, participants did not differ in the total number of close friendships reported. This means that gender identity and connection to LGBT community did not impact the number of close friends transgender individuals count in their network; rather they impacted who is more likely to be counted as friends.

Transgender Friendship Patterns: Connection to LGBT Community and Gender Identity

Our findings suggest that for our trans participants, both LGBT community affiliation and gender identity impact friendship patterns. Friendship patterns were explored based on the number of friends who identify as transgender/cisgender, sexual minority/heterosexual, and LGBT affiliated/non-affiliated. For all of the analyses there were no significant interactions between LGBT community and gender identity.

As hypothesized, trans participants who are affiliated (vs. non-affiliated) with the LGBT community reported more transgender friends, more sexual minority friends, and more friends who were also LGBT affiliated. They also reported fewer heterosexual friends, and fewer non-affiliated friends when compared with non-affiliated individuals. For our participants, then, being connected to the community was strongly associated with having LGBT friends. These findings suggest that trans individuals who are differently connected to the LGBT community display distinct friendship patterns and may be negotiating different types of bias and support within their friendship networks.

It is important to note that of the total sample, 78% of participants considered themselves a part of the community; while 22% did not. Though not necessarily surprising, these findings do underscore the need for researchers to question the way transgender experience is primarily framed under the larger LGBT umbrella. A sizeable number of our participants identified outside that community, and their friendship networks reflected that.

As hypothesized, trans men reported more sexual minority and more LGBT affiliated friends when compared to trans women. In addition, trans women reported

more non-affiliated friends. Overall, these patterns suggest that the friendship networks for trans women and men are distinct. We predicted non-binary trans individuals would have more sexual minority and LGBT affiliated friends based on Factor and Rothblum's [19] findings that genderqueer (non-binary) individuals feel more connected to the LGB community than do trans women and trans men. However, we did not find support for these hypotheses. Non-binary friendship patterns for number of cisgender friends, sexual minority friends, and LGBT affiliated friends fell in between those of trans men and women. Consequently, their friendship patterns were not significantly distinguished from either of the other groups. The only exception was that both trans men and non-binary individuals reported fewer non-affiliated friends than did trans women. These findings suggest that additional research is needed to better understand the factors impacting non-binary trans individuals.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study focused on describing close friendship profiles of transgender individuals and found unique patterns based on gender identity and LGBT affiliation; however, this research is accompanied by its own set of unique limitations. Close friendships are characterized by more frequent interaction and affection, providing more benefits, and being more exclusive than are casual friendships [37, 62]. The narrow criteria accompanying our word choice of “close” friend may have led to more similarity in friendship choices for our participants than had participants been instructed to think of “casual” friends or friends of an “unspecified” nature. In addition, participants were asked to describe up to eight of their closest friends but were not provided a definition of a close friendship. Research providing a common definition for participants, therefore, may yield different results. Definitions of friendship may be particularly important in light of research that suggests that LGBT individuals define friends more broadly (e.g. friends as family, voluntary kin), especially in the face of familial rejection [75, 78]. Additionally, LGBT individuals are more likely to consider their current and past partners as friends [80], which may shift friendship patterns.

Our participants represent a convenience sample collected online. Online recruitment and sampling is particularly useful for reaching out to transgender samples where participants may have heightened concern about anonymity and may not otherwise have access to the survey [59]. However, online sampling has been shown to disproportionately reflect a White, middle-upper class, educated experience [14]. Considering 84.2% of our participant sample identified as White and 65% is middle-upper class, our demographics are consistent with this trend. Any interpretation of the present data should note these trends.

Future research should consider how other identities (e.g. age, socioeconomic status, race) interact with gender identity, sexual orientation, and LGBT affiliation to impact friendships choices. In particular, future research should consider comparative analysis of White and racial minorities, especially considering how distinct friendship patterns are formed among racial/ethnic minorities [73]. Trans people of color are marginalized in the larger LGBT community [17] and future

research should consider how this marginalization impacts friendship patterns, in both same and cross-category contexts.

The present study reveals clear friendship patterns that differ across gender identity and LGBT affiliation. Social identity, for this study, was used as a grouping variable based on participant self-identification. Friendships profiles were developed based on participants' descriptions of their close friends with regard to the same social identity categories (e.g. sexual orientation, gender identity). Differences in friendship profiles did arise across these social identities, suggesting that grouping used was relevant to participant's friendship profiles. However, an assessment of the meaning participants assigned to these categories was not included. For instance, the research did not consider whether sexual or gender identity was disclosed to, or acknowledged, by friends. Additionally, we coded gender identity into three categories: trans men, trans women, and non-binary, and did not ask for additional information to help contextualize their identification. Future research should address the meaning assigned to these social identities and also their respective importance to participants [77].

Conclusions

While gender has been a major focus in friendship/relationship research [11, 36, 45, 52, 61], it has overwhelming assumed cisgender experience and relied on binary assumption of gender/sex. By investigating transgender friendship patterns across gender identity, the present research complicates these assumptions and calls attention to the need to expand the way we understand gender to shape social and personal relationships. Although the focus of this research was on understanding the friendship patterns of transgender individuals, it is important to note that the majority of their friendships were with cisgender friends. There is a need, then, to acknowledge that cisgender individuals are also negotiating a more nuanced understandings of gender within their friendship networks. The focus on gender identity as a variable and the inclusion of non-binary trans individuals in particular, was important not only to better represent the range of transgender experience, but also to complicate the binary assumptions of gender which has guided much of the friendship literature.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent This research was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the home institution. These guidelines ensured that we received informed consent by our adult participants.

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