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# Normalizing Gay and Straight Male Friendships: A Qualitative Analysis of Beliefs and Attitudes in Canada and the United States

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This study sought to shed light on the complexity of male cross-orientation friendships by using Sexual Script Theory to critically evaluate how existing masculine sexual scripts may be influencing men's willingness to enter such friendships. While it is known that men enter friendships with other men across sexual orientation, little to no research exists around their beliefs and attitudes toward these relationships. This qualitative study stems from a larger, mixed-methods study on heterosexual and gay men's lifestyle habits. It sought to draw these contemporary attitudes from Canadian and American men and investigate how these relationships are viewed to assess men's willingness to enter them. The sample ( $N = 982$ ) was drawn from the qualitative section of a questionnaire examining men's lifestyle habits and their relation to social and sexual attitudes. Participants responded to an open-ended (i.e., essay box) item asking: "Do you think it's valuable to communities for gay men and straight men to be friends? If so, why? If no, why not?." Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis approach was used to develop a final thematic structure of two main themes and six subthemes with saturation of the responses. The first major theme was that cross-orientation friendship can be a vehicle for growth and social cohesion and the related subthemes were: these friendships can (a) allow for exploration of masculinity, (b) reduce stigma and homophobia, (c) show the value of diversity, and (d) offer exposure to the LGBTQ+ community. The second major theme was that all forms of friendship are valuable and the related subthemes were: (a) friendship is about personal and common interests and (b) sexual orientation should have nothing to do with friendship. The results revealed a general openness and willingness to enter these friendships, with an overall acknowledgment that these relationships are not yet normalized.

## Public Significance Statement

This study found that the majority of men are willing to enter a friendship with another man who is of the opposite sexual orientation than themselves. These results hold important implications for normalizing cross-orientation friendships, and suggest that current masculine sexual scripts are slowly being redefined to accommodate newer attitudes and beliefs among men surrounding masculinity, friendship, and sexuality.

**Keywords:** gay men, heterosexual men, cross-orientation friendships, sexual scripts

Friendships are a fundamental aspect of psychological development and personal wellbeing (Brown, 1999; Narr et al., 2019; Smetana, 2006), and tend to develop within social groups of

like-minded individuals (Ueno & Gentile, 2015a). Friendships that are developed outside of social group boundaries—such as across sexual orientation—provide unique challenges as well as potential benefits to both individuals involved. For example, in their friendships with LGBTQ+ individuals, heterosexual people have the opportunity to learn more about sexual diversity as well as aspects of their own sexual identity (Galupo & St. John, 2001; Rumens, 2018). This may lead to a breakdown of homophobic attitudes and reduced discomfort in socializing with LGBTQ+ individuals. Similarly, in these friendships, LGBTQ+ individuals are able to develop connections with the heterosexual community, break down heterophobic attitudes, and feel more at ease in social situations with heterosexual individuals (Fee, 2000; Provence et al., 2019, 2014; Ueno & Gentile, 2015a).

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In October 2018, the findings of this study were disseminated in the form of a poster presentation at the annual meeting of the Canadian Sex Research Forum (CSRF) in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. There are no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Empirical studies have begun to assess different aspects of cross-orientation friendships (Baiocco et al., 2014; Cook et al., 2012; Galupo, 2007, 2009; Muraco, 2005; Ueno & Gentile, 2015a, 2015b), with many focusing on friendships between heterosexual women and gay men (Bartlett et al., 2009; Rumens, 2008; Russell et al., 2013, 2017, 2018). Among the few studies investigating friendships between men across sexual orientation (Barrett, 2013, 2016; Provence et al., 2014), there still remains a dearth of literature exploring the attitudes and values of gay male and straight male relationships specifically in modern society. The current research adds to this burgeoning field of study by examining men's attitudes and beliefs toward male cross-orientation friendships in an online sample collected in Spring 2017.

### Same and Cross-Category Friendship

Friendship is commonly defined in the literature as a "voluntary, personal relationship, typically providing intimacy and assistance, in which the two parties like one another and seek each other's company" (Fehr, 1996, p.7). Research on friendship suggests that these relationships enrich the lives of the persons involved in various ways, such as providing emotional support and acceptance (Beazidou & Botsoglou, 2016; Elmer et al., 2017), facilitating the exploration of social identities and individuation from family (Anderson & Fowers, 2020; Cherry et al., 2020), and being a direct source of happiness (Demir et al., 2007). However, the decisions and reasons for entering friendships are different for everyone depending on the histories, identities, and experiences of the individuals involved.

People have the tendency to connect with others who are similar to them, and this is a fundamental aspect of social relationships (McPherson et al., 2001; Riley & White, 2016). Research has consistently shown that friendships often reveal this tendency, in that people select friends who share parallels on the basis of gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation (Galupo, 2009; Patel, 2017; Ueno, 2010). As such, same-category friendships are important because they are social relationships in which individuals experience relative equality and mutuality (Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013), and this is valid for both majority and minority group members.

Cross-category relationships are expected to have developed by overcoming barriers and challenging norms; therefore, the research on cross-category friendships has chiefly focused on the negotiation of difference and inequality in these relationships (Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013). For example, adolescent women interviewed for a study on cross-orientation friendships (Galupo & St. John, 2001) discussed the ways in which these friendships offer spaces for critical evaluations of stereotypes, opportunities for divergence from dichotomous thinking, as well as new perspectives. In this way, cross-category friendships may provide a unique space for minority individuals to seek acceptance from the majority, and likewise, for majority individuals to gain increased insight into the minority experience.

In their study on male friendships and female friendships in black and white adolescents, Pagano and Hirsch (2007) found that female friendships are consistently more supportive and include heightened self-disclosure compared with male friendships. In addition, they found that female friendships involve balanced understanding and intimacy, compared with one-third of male friendships that were

characterized by an absence of intimacy, and a sense of defensiveness. These findings are consistent with other research (Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013) and bring up the question of how friends navigate relationships that are both same and cross-category. In their study on the power and quality of same-sex friendships, Veniegas and Peplau (1997) reported that people tend to seek friendships with persons of their own sex with the assumption of equality. This, however, does not consider the complexity of same-sex friendships across sexual orientation, especially for males, given that female friendships are consistently shown in the literature as being more open and equitable.

### Cross-Orientation Friendship

All sexual identities and expressions reveal distinct perspectives that are grounded in specific socio-historical contexts (Diamond, 2002; Foucault, 1978; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). As a result of this, heterosexuality has become the norm and being gay is considered nonnormative (Katz, 1995). Based on these enduring attitudes, one could make the assumption that friendships between heterosexual and gay individuals are unlikely due to their supposed social and interpersonal differences, as well as the propensity for increased stigma and fear. In other words, a degree of stigmatization is likely to occur in an intimate relationship where the majority member brings their ideologies and interprets the minority member's behaviors and status through those ideologies (Sargent & Thomas, 2020; Sexton, 2017; Ueno & Gentile, 2015a).

Earlier research on cross-orientation friendships supports these arguments. A vignette study by Muraco (2005) found that straight men and women were more likely to disapprove of their hypothetical friends' behaviors when those friends are gay men and lesbians as opposed to straight men and women. In her qualitative study, Price (1999) found that approximately two-thirds of the gay-straight male friendship dyads reported anxiety or conflict surrounding the gay members' expressions of sexuality (i.e., emotionality, physical touch) often rooted in some forms of homophobia. She also found that the heterosexual members of these dyads were more concerned about other people, such as family members and heterosexual male friends, questioning their sexual identity as a result of their friendship with a gay man. Fee (2000) found similar outcomes with his heterosexual male participants noting the absence of sexual desire as being a requirement for the establishment and continuation of their friendships with gay men. These attitudes lend to the problematic aspect of these relationships by only perpetuating the stigma that gay men must want something more in their friendships with heterosexual men.

According to Baiocco et al. (2014), members of the LGBTQ+ community tend to enter friendships open-mindedly and with fewer tendencies for seeking similarities (i.e., interests, hobbies) with the other person. The researchers investigated cross-orientation friendship patterns, well-being, and social anxiety among heterosexual, lesbian, and gay young adults. They found that the lesbian and gay participants reported a significantly higher number of cross-gender and cross-orientation friendships, while the heterosexual participants seemed to form friendships based more on similarity. From these findings the authors argued that lesbian and gay individuals are more likely to seek diversity in friendships despite the enduring discrimination, whereas heterosexual individuals—having not experienced the same prejudices and negative attitudes as sexual

minorities—tended to prefer friendships with people who were more like them (Baiocco et al., 2014; Cui et al., 2020).

Some studies show that gay men specifically are unlikely to form close friendships with heterosexual men (Galupo, 2007; Ueno, 2010) for the many reasons already mentioned. Schneider and Witherspoon (2000) found that gay men had a significantly lower number of same-sex friendships (49%) than heterosexual men (76%), heterosexual women (80%), and lesbians (84%). Given these findings, and the tendency for heterosexual men to enter friendships with others who are like them (Baiocco et al., 2014), it would seem that male friendship, especially across orientation, would be unlikely.

Encouragingly, some studies have begun to suggest that men's same-sex relationships are in fact becoming more emotionally nuanced and intimate, thus pointing to a shift in masculine socialization and male identities overall (Barrett, 2013, 2016, Robinson et al., 2018). Some of these studies have begun to focus on same-sex male friendships across sexual orientation, and their findings demonstrate a major departure from earlier attitudes and findings. A study by Barrett (2013) assessing friendship pairs involving heterosexual and gay men found that the heterosexual participants were generally less anxious about these relationships, and when compared with earlier discourse, expressed positive differences in attitudes about "coming out," physical touch, and their gay friend's partners.

Findings from another study by Barrett (2016) suggested that gay and straight men were using humor in their friendships as a tool for navigating their sexual differences and allowing for less rigidity in views toward binary sexual orientation (i.e., homoerotic joking, pretending to be together when assumed so for humor sake, say at a restaurant). This may be a way of the heterosexual men showing their gay male friend a sense of acceptance. In this study, humor was viewed as an adaptive mechanism for differentiating romantic and platonic relations between the men, compared with previously held attitudes and actions of discomfort, fear, and anxiety. Although much of the earlier research on same-sex male friendships generally emphasized the existence of socially imposed boundaries restricting the expression of verbal, physical, and emotional closeness—as these actions are associated with homophobia (Bank & Hansford, 2000)—Barrett's findings speak to a potential positive shift in the attitudes of men who are entering friendships with other men within and across sexual orientation, and what they are gaining from these relationships. More recent work by Rumens (2017, 2018) has shown promise between same-sex and heterosexual men being more open to friendships in the context of the workplace.

### Male Friendship and Sexual Script Theory

The constructs that underpin male friendship can be more easily understood through an examination of male sexual scripts. Sexual Script Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) views gender as being central to one's identity, and sheds light upon the linkages and subtleties between one's private actions and public expectations. Simon and Gagnon (1986) suggested that gender is learned through interactions with others as well as from greater cultural narratives and norms that identify the "proper" ways to behave, often based on cultural and societal norms. Most of the cultural scripts surrounding gender and related gendered behavior tend to invariably address heterosexuality concurrently. These gendered categories hold

important implications for masculine sexual scripts, as they assume all gender categories are mutually exclusive (Nagel et al., 2015). This would mean that any behavior, quality, or form that is not unequivocally masculine must be the opposite, feminine.

In the (heterosexual) masculine sexual script men are often rewarded for being overtly sexual, maintaining a heightened sex drive, and having multiple female sexual partners (Nagel et al., 2015). While engaging in sexual acts with little emotive engagement with women may be prized, this script can lack meaningful interactions because emotion is associated with femininity (Kimmel, 2008). Also, given that men's sexual interactions are presumed to be with women, it follows that their nonsexual social interactions are most often with other men. Same-sex friendships, Nagel et al. (2015) argue, could put men in a situation of discomfort where their social interactions with other men are viewed as sexual or intimate. Therefore, men may be seen socializing with other men in ways that display typical masculine traits and this involves perpetuations of homophobic attitudes (Mahalik et al., 2003; Nagel et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2019).

Similar to the heterosexual male sexual script, the gay male sexual script also describes their status as potentially being determined by the number of sexual conquests and attractiveness of their various sexual partners. A key difference being the increased awareness of emotionality and expression of feelings, as well as more consciousness of safer sex practices (Nagel et al., 2015). Within the gay community, masculinity is often still valued. As such, it is not uncommon for gay men to either push against the notions of gender and masculinity versus femininity, whereas others may prioritize displaying their masculinity insofar as to prove their maleness despite their sexual orientation (Brennan et al., 2012; Kahn et al., 2013; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2011; Scoats & Robinson, 2020). With these parallels between both heterosexual and gay sexual scripts pertaining to masculinity, the questions remain why same-sex male friendships are not considered as fulfilling as female same-sex friendships, and why male cross-orientation friendships may not be more common.

Given that female friendships are rated as more intimate, involve more discussions about negative life events, and have increased exchanges of private information and personal emotions when compared with male friendships (Roy et al., 2000), it may be that vulnerability in male friendships could lead to more conflict or discomfort. The aforementioned scripts outlining proper male sexual and social interactions have created a difficult understanding of what masculinity and male friendships can and should look like. Men have been socialized to hide expressions of weakness and vulnerability, causing them to isolate themselves more, leaving little room for the nurturance that can come from meaningful relationships. This supports a culture with enduring heteronormative attitudes where conflicts between gay and heterosexual men are vital to the maintenance of gender and sexual identities. Heterosexual and gay men may therefore choose to form a friendship with each other as a way of increasing emotional intimacy and connection with friends that they may not be able to obtain otherwise.

### Purpose

Sexual Scripting Theory describes masculine identities as being socially and culturally constructed (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). This study sought to investigate under which circumstances men are

entering same-sex friendships across sexual orientation and what benefits they derive from these relationships. Our findings may provide insight into whether men's current attitudes have diverged from previous scripts. We expected that the participant's responses will extend Barrett's (2013, 2016) findings in reflecting a reluctance to enter cross-orientation friendships due to enduring stigma and fear, while also revealing some willingness to enter these friendships by exploring the potential value added. Furthermore, we anticipated more flexibility in lieu of permanence regarding sexual scripts pertaining to masculinity and traditional male behavior.

## Methods

This article explores a qualitative question asked as part of a larger study assessing men's lifestyles, attitudes, and beliefs (e.g., types of friends, identity, masculinity, body-image, hobbies). Men in the study were asked the open-ended, qualitative question, "Do you think it's valuable to communities for gay men and straight men to be friends? If so, why? If no, why not?" as well as a series of demographic questions (e.g., age, country, sexual orientation). Other qualitative (i.e., cross-orientation friendships during the coming out period, whether having a gay male friend made it easier to meet women) and quantitative (i.e., various validated scales assessing topics such as masculinity, sex roles, body type, attitudes toward infidelity) measures were used, but not focal points for the scope of this article. While sexual and gender diverse (SGD) and LGBTQ+ are more recently used interchangeably in academic literature (Eckstrand & Potter, 2017), we have used LGBTQ+ throughout as this is more in line with the language being used at the time of data collection.

## Participants

Prior to data collection, this study was reviewed by, and approved by, the REB at Wilfrid Laurier University and Texas Christian University. To participate, men had to live in Canada or the United States and be between the ages of 18 and 50. A cutoff of 50, while arbitrary, was used in order to reduce major cohort differences (i.e., older generations faced unique challenges such as the AIDS crisis, bathhouse raids, and other unfreedoms). The goal of the present analysis was to get a contemporary view on gay male/straight male friendships. A total of 982 participants were recruited in 2017 via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (see Buhrmester et al., 2011). All participants collected online via Mechanical Turk were directed to Qualtrics and asked to complete the answers honestly with their full attention. The title of the study on Mechanical Turk was "how are men's lifestyle habits related to their social attitudes." They were informed of the names and affiliations of all of the researchers. Each participant collected via Mechanical Turk was given \$1 USD for completing the study and those collected via social media (few participants) were entered into a draw for a \$50 Starbucks gift card.

It was not hidden from the respondents that the study had a primary goal of assessing gay/straight male friendships based on the transparency of the qualitative questions. Furthermore, participants were informed in the consent form that sensitive questions may be asked (i.e., sexual experiences, body image, and personal history). As such, those participating were likely more comfortable disclosing such information. Participants were informed that their

responses would be confidential, anonymous, and secured (i.e., no IP address disclosed, secure HTTPS servers). Heterosexual men ( $N = 712$ ; Canada = 34, the United States = 678) and gay men ( $N = 270$ , Canada = 39, the United States = 231) met inclusion criteria, completed the qualitative questions online, and were included in the data analysis. Because of the limited number of Canadian Mechanical Turk participants, we were unable to make any cross-country comparisons.

We acknowledge that sexuality may not always be best defined in dichotomous terms. In the present sample, a total of 12.2% of heterosexual men stated that while they self-identify as heterosexual/straight, they had engaged in a previous consensual sexual experience with another male. Participants were predominantly Caucasian and ranged in age from 18 to 50 ( $M = 28.52$ ; Mode = 26). Further demographics are reported in Table 1.

Roughly half (49.1%) of the heterosexual men reported being friends with their gay male friend(s) prior to and during the coming out stages, versus (50.9%) initiating the friendship once their gay male friend(s) had already come out as gay. See Table 1 for further demographic information.

## Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) six phases of qualitative thematic analyses were followed and their inductive/semantic approach—meaning the analysis, coding, and theme development reflect the explicit content of the data—was assumed. During the first phase we familiarized ourselves with the data in an immersive way, meaning we read through the raw data multiple times to start to develop a broad idea of what the data were saying. During the second phase we generated initial basic codes to identify a feature (something interesting or notable) about the data. The third phase required that we sort the many codes into potential themes and collated all the relevant data extracts or quotations into the themes that were appropriate. Throughout this phase some codes merged together, some started to form into major themes or subthemes, while others were discarded. The fourth phase involved a review and refinement of the themes we developed in the previous phase. To achieve this, we reviewed all of the collated extracts for each theme and had to discern whether they formed a clear pattern, or not. This process was repeated while considering the validity or fit of each theme with relation to the data set as a whole. This allowed us to reconsider certain codes and begin to develop multiple thematic maps. During the fifth phase we created two thematic maps and began defining each theme, while continuing to ensure these maps were consistent with the overall data. As such, all themes were refined to the point that they each told one part of the entire story of the dataset and were easily explained in a few short phrases. The last phase involved writing this research report with clear explanations of each theme, and a coherent analysis of what they mean.

For the current study, the first author cleaned the dataset for nullified responses and read through the entire dataset 3 times, in no particular order, while noting recurring concepts and ideas for coding in subsequent phases. Approximately 900 responses were coded in the initial coding phases and 30 codes were generated. The codes were first organized into ten themes that applied to either or both sexual orientations (i.e., these friendships have no value, all friendships are valuable, sexual orientation, diversity and equality, reduce stereotype and stigma, strengthen male bonds,

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information*

Demographic	Gay/survey	Heterosexual survey
Total participants	270	712
Age	18–50 ( <i>M</i> = 30.11, <i>Mode</i> = 26, <i>SD</i> = 7.19)	18–50 ( <i>M</i> = 28.55, <i>Mode</i> = 26, <i>SD</i> = 10.96)
Country	Canada—39 (14.4%) United States—231 (85.6%)	Canada—34 (4.8%) United States—678 (95.2%)
Race/ethnicity	Indigenous—4 (1.5%) Pacific Islander/Hawaiian—3 (1.1%) African American—10 (3.7%) African—1 (.4%) Caribbean—1 (.4%) Hispanic/Latin American—15 (5.6%) Asian/Chinese—6 (2.2%) East Asian—1 (.4%) South Asian—2 (.7%) Southeast Asian—2 (.7%) Middle Eastern—1 (.4%) White (e.g., Western European decent)—59 (21.9%) White (e.g., Eastern European decent)—12 (4.4%) White (e.g., British, Scottish, Irish decent)—88 (32.6%) Mixed/multirace—21 (7.8%) Other—11 (4.1%) Not reported—33 (12.2%)	Indigenous—18 (2.5%) Pacific Islander/Hawaiian—3 (.4%) African American—56 (7.9%) African—4 (.6%) Caribbean—4 (.6%) Hispanic/Latin American—43 (6.0%) Asian/Chinese—10 (1.4%) East Asian—16 (2.2%) South Asian—18 (2.5%) Southeast Asian—10 (1.4%) Middle Eastern—5 (.7%) White (e.g., Western European decent)—177 (24.9%) White (e.g., Eastern European decent)—46 (6.5%) White (e.g., British, Scottish, Irish decent)—220 (30.9%) Mixed/multirace—33 (4.6%) Other—24 (3.4%) Not reported—25 (3.5%)

exposure to LGBTQ+ community, we are all human, new perspectives and points of view, personality matters in determining friendship).

Upon review of these themes by the first and second authors, further refinement occurred. This refinement involved a review of collated extracts for each theme and consideration of whether they formed coherent major or sub themes, whether there was enough data to support these themes, or if the data were too diverse to remain a theme. As such, some themes collapsed into each other due to similarity and frequency of shared data. Some became subthemes as their coded extracts differed from the major themes, but were significant enough to become smaller ones. Others were discarded as they were not individually valid with relation to the data set, nor did they accurately reflect the story of the data set as a whole. For example, if a participant responded in a way where it was clear they did not comprehend the question or were just typing in random letters and symbols, their responses were removed. Given that the overall story of the data was not yet known, preliminary drafts of major themes had the relevant subthemes separated by sexual orientation. However, after much familiarization with the data, and six iterations of the coded responses, it became clear that there was significant overlap of attitudes and beliefs across all respondents. As a result, sexual orientation was removed from the map and all themes were merged and redefined. Respondent’s beliefs about friendship were reorganized into two major themes and relevant subthemes were defined.

**Results**

The thematic analysis presented a final thematic structure of two main themes and six subthemes. The first main theme was (1) cross-orientation friendship can be a vehicle for growth and social cohesion, and the related subthemes were: (a) exploration of masculinity, (b) reduce stigma and homophobia, (c) value of diversity,

and (d) exposure to the LGBTQ+ community. The second main theme was (2) all forms of friendship are valuable, and the related subthemes were: (a) friendship is about personality and common interests, and (b) sexual orientation should have nothing to do with friendship.

**Cross-Orientation Friendship Can Be a Vehicle for Growth and Social Cohesion**

Many of the respondents mentioned different ways in which cross-orientation friendships can be healing. More specifically, men elaborated on how male cross-orientation friendships, specifically, have the ability to remedy or at least shed light upon many of the sociocultural issues and stressors that gay and heterosexual men face every day. These opportunities for healing are explored through each subtheme below.

**Exploration of Masculinity**

The respondents mention that friendships between gay and heterosexual men are important for allowing exploration of masculinity scripts and for challenging what it means to be a man in today’s society. As one heterosexual respondent said: “Men need male relationships regardless of sexual orientation” (United States, age 34).

Another heterosexual participant disclosed a constrained view of masculinity while also expressing an openness to enter these friendships. Despite there being no direct mention of masculinity, his response reveals the complexity of these male friendships for both sides.

I like to think of myself as a progressive, tolerant person, but obviously I have some kind of visceral discomfort with the idea of two men in a sexual or romantic relationship. I’m not proud of it, and I wish I felt differently, but I’d be lying if I said that feeling didn’t exist within me . . . his is just to say that I think my homophobia—since that’s what

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it is—is probably the result of the intense social stigma that still surrounds male homosexuality. In other words, it's something I learned along the way, not something innate to me. So it seems to me that it would be valuable for gay men and straight men to be friends, because real friendship involves identification and intimacy and empathy, and it's harder for prejudice to take root among those conditions. (United States, 30)

Another gay participant spoke to hegemonic masculinity and masculinity scripts in arguing that these friendships could offer straight men a safe space to expose their vulnerabilities. In addition, this respondent mentioned that all men could find common ground when discussing their shared experiences of pain and hardship:

I think gay men and straight men have more in common as men than they think. I find that my straight male friends enjoy having me around because they can let their macho guard down a bit and I like being able to connect with men without the added drama of flirting and attraction. I find that most of the straight men I'm close to, I'm close to because we can relate to having gone through difficult times. My two closest straight male friends at the moment are both veterans . . . I could never handle combat, but I have experienced trauma and hardship, and so it's easy for me to open up to them and vice versa. (United States, 27)

Male friendships offer the opportunity to cultivate stronger connections and enhance perceptions of what masculinity is. The respondents have articulated that these friendships would encourage empathy, compassion, and emotional support—sentiments that are often missing in male friendships—and that they are open to this possibility.

### Reduce Stigma and Homophobia

A significant amount of respondents touched on the ability for these friendships to lead to a decline in the perpetuation of stigma toward gay men, and could also be a driving force in the reduction of homophobic attitudes overall. One heterosexual respondent said: "Sure! The more gay-straight friendships out there, the more acceptance of queerness there will be, and hopefully from there less homophobia, violence against gays, etc." (United States, 34). Another heterosexual respondent shed light on the fallaciousness of these stigmas:

The more gay and straight men are friends the more it'll be easy for the community as a whole to see that there's nothing really outlandish about gay men. It will help to cleanse the community of stigma regarding gay men. (United States, 25)

One heterosexual participant mentioned these prejudices as bidirectional, in that heterosexual men have preconceived judgments of gay men and gay men have their own established beliefs and fears of befriending heterosexual men.

Yes. I don't see any particular reason for the division. As with all ignorance, the best method for adjusting certain prejudices and attitudes is exposure to a culture or lifestyle. Ultimately, we can create a more communal and loving society if people understand each other better and otherwise get along, treat each other with respect and kindness, and so forth. (United States, 31)

A gay participant follows this line of thinking while referencing the "othering" and fear that both populations experience when discussing friendship with one another. He feels that this fear will only diminish with exposure:

Yes, of course. We don't want to continue living in a society of "otherness" where gay and straight men fear each other. Compassion for each other is built as we come to learn about each other's experiences. Gay men being accepted as friends by straight men should, over time, reduce homophobia in our society. (Canada, 26)

Another gay respondent elaborates on these stigmas by giving examples as well as anecdotal evidence to the efficacy of these friendships:

It helps to break down the stigma of gay men as being very feminine and only engaging in activities that straight women enjoy. It also shows that straight men can be friends with gay men without there being any ulterior sexual or romantic motive from the gay man. I actually have several very close straight male friends who fully support me as gay male and through their friendship have actually changed my own preconceptions of straight males and have taught me to be more accepting of others as well. (Canada, 30)

### Value of Diversity

The majority of participants spoke about the value of diversity. They felt that male cross-orientation friendships could offer new perspectives and ways of seeing the world, which would ultimately expand social and cultural attitudes. As a heterosexual participant responded: "I do. It's great for communities to have many different viewpoints and ways of seeing things, which gay men and heterosexual men being friends would have. It would potentially open minds and broaden horizons" (United States, 30). To illustrate the significance of these responses, another heterosexual participant says:

Yes, I think it's similar to having any kind of diversity in a group. Having more exposure to different types of people helps to overcome predispositions to discriminate against groups you don't identify with or understand at a personal level. (United States, 28)

Similar to their heterosexual counterparts, many gay respondents expressed more of a global attitude in discussing the value of these friendships: "Yes. Diversity of experience and worldview is important. Surrounding yourself with people exactly like yourself leads to groupthink and echo chambers" (United States, 26). Another gay respondent spoke to the fear and isolation that gay men experience, and that diversity in friendship could possibly resolve this: "Yes. Gay guys have a tendency to isolate themselves among other gay men (because, understandably, a sense of safety.) But coming out later in life than many, I have mostly straight friends. Diversity is important" (United States, 35).

Another gay participant argues that diversity in general, and not just with relation to sexual orientation, is important. He also explains that there is value in diversity for everyone, not just the gay community:

Yes, absolutely. For the same reason it is important to have friends of different ethnic, religious, and monetary backgrounds. Having a diverse friend groups adds depth as a person and gives us different perspectives, which is good for both straight and gay folks. (United States, 27)

As one heterosexual male participant added:

I think they can be invaluable to building connections. They are just people too, and most of my best friends are straight. I think this may be due to the fact that most people do identify as straight, so the probability of making a straight male friend is already there. I also think they can be

powerful allies, in subtle ways. They can use their privilege to show the world that it is ok for men to be emotional with each other, to be vulnerable with one another in a platonic context. It is ok to be friends with people who are different than themselves. (United States, 27)

As shown, the majority of respondents were unanimous in thinking that friendships with individuals of a different orientation add value to their life. This value would come from differing worldviews and perspectives and was seen as an opportunity to diversify their thinking.

### Exposure to the LGBTQ+ Community

Along with the theme of male cross-orientation friendships as being the possible source for rapprochement in sexual minority and majority groups, many respondents expressed how these relationships could ultimately lead to increased normalization of the LGBTQ+ community. These sentiments were shared across both groups of respondents, as one heterosexual participant said: “I think it encourages men to bond and may reduce violence toward LGBT communities” (United States, 19). Another heterosexual participant commented similarly: “Because it should be nothing wrong with a gay man and a straight man hanging out. It also somewhat normalizes homosexuality within the straight communities that may have concerns with it” (United States, 31).

Conversely, this gay respondent speaks anecdotally about his positive and negative experiences of friendships with heterosexual men while also articulating the value as going both ways:

I think it’s incredibly important. Although I was friends with straight men before gay men, I have noticed there is a different type of acceptance. I have gay friends that don’t feel that they are able to be friends with straight men because they are too nervous to do so. And they tend to feel more ostracized from the rest of the world and only spend time in gay bars or gay softball leagues. We talk about diversity and inclusion as being soooo important . . . that goes for the LGBTQ community as well. I wouldn’t trade my straight guy friendships for anything in the world. (United States, 29)

Another gay participant responds similarly:

Yes. I feel that most straight men do not understand the LGBT community. I cannot tell you how many times a straight man has spewed homophobic remarks toward me once they knew I was gay. I do not understand why straight men automatically think that all gay men want to sleep with them. I think it is extremely important for straight and gay men to be friends in order for each community to have a better understanding of the other. Straight men may be missing out on some amazing friendships because of some horribly warped view of gay men. (United States, 21)

Unlike the heterosexual male community, the LGBTQ+ community is considered a minority group that is actively seeking normalization. These results show that both the gay and heterosexual respondents were aware of this reality, and the majority of them see these friendships as offering an opportunity for positive change.

### All Forms of Friendship Are Valuable

Alternative to the first major theme that describes male cross-orientation friendship as a vehicle for growth and social cohesion, many other respondents described the ways in which friendships, in general, are valuable. And that people should not have to forcibly

enter specific friendships—such as cross-orientation friendships—with the intention of fixing societal issues or minimizing cultural divides.

### Sexual Orientation Should Have Nothing to Do With Friendship

Many responses addressed the value of friendship while highlighting the fact that this value is present despite sexual orientation. Both gay and heterosexual respondents shed light on one’s sex life or sexual preferences as being a small aspect of who they are as a person and should, thus, be considered irrelevant as it pertains to friendship. One heterosexual participant indicated:

It should be totally up to the individuals on whether or not they want to be friends because no one should be forced. I don’t think its valuable nor invaluable because sexuality is just one aspect of an individual, there is so much more. (United States, 23)

Another gay participant responded similarly:

Life isn’t all about sex. To me sex is a small portion of life, so it is important to be friends with a variety of people, regardless of sexuality. If there is any homophobia then mixing sexualities in groups is important for reducing that insecurity. (United States, 28)

As shown, most respondents were willing to reflect on their personal beliefs, and many felt sexual orientation was irrelevant in this discussion. As one heterosexual respondent put it: “I’m more of the kind of guy who will be friends with anyone who I want to be friends with based on their personalities. If they are gay, straight, trans, whatever, there just has to be that friendship connection” (United States, 25). These men provide a progressive and optimistic outlook by describing how sexual orientation should not determine who you befriend, while other respondents specified what factors inevitably play a role in who they become friends with.

### Friendship Is About Personality and Common Interests

Respondents elaborated on the qualities that they seek out in prospective friendships. Specifically, similarities in personality and common interests were of major importance for many respondents. The heterosexual respondents felt they should not have to be friends with a man because of his gayness, and likewise, they should be able to befriend them if they are like-minded and want to. One heterosexual respondent shared:

It all depends on their personalities. They shouldn’t be friends just because one of them is gay and the other is straight, they should be friends because they share common interests. Of course it’s valuable for communities to have pairs of friends from different sexualities, but that shouldn’t be the driving reason for them being friends. (United States, 18)

Another heterosexual participant revealed a similar protective mentality while stressing the importance of compatibility:

There’s no reason why gay and straight people ‘must’ be friends, but there’s no reason why they ‘can’t’ be friends. Everyone should live and let live, and we should be able to get along with any person whose personality is compatible with ours, regardless of what their orientation is. (United States, 30)

The gay men's responses touched more on the fact that all men have things in common and that curiosity and open-mindedness are important. As one gay man explains:

Probably. I think people should be friends with people they get along with and/or have something in common with. If they happen to be gay/straight, it shouldn't really be relevant. But it's probably valuable to communities for people to form friendships with other people in general. (United States, 36)

### Discussion

This study sought to draw North American men's current attitudes about cross-orientation friendships to further understand the value and benefits of these friendships. Results from the question "Do you think it's valuable to communities for gay men and straight men to be friends? If so, why? If no, why not?" were examined using an inductive thematic approach and the findings were divided into two major themes with six relative subthemes. Many of the respondents were able to speak to their own socially and culturally ingrained fears or prejudices about befriending men across orientation, but despite this, the results painted a picture of curiosity and hope. This suggests that male sexual scripts are being redefined, specifically surrounding masculinity and friendship. Some stressed that sexual orientation did not really matter in their friendships, however, subsequently went on to discuss the benefits specific to having a cross-orientation friendship. Such friendships can offer substantive benefits to gay and straight men to outweigh the potential costs—this may be especially true in countries where there are political and legal unfreedoms for gay men. Overall, the emergent themes of this study provided a general consensus: men nowadays recognize that friendships with other men are important for many reasons and are more or less open to entering friendships across orientation.

Most of the respondents spoke to the benefits of being friends with individuals of the same sex but opposite sexual orientation. Many stated that knowing someone with different life experiences allows for greater acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, but also provides a broader understanding of different experiences and diversity. Men talked about these friendships as being opportunities to explore similar hobbies and passions where intimacy would simply never be an option. This is noteworthy as some heterosexual men's responses perpetuated the fear-based notion that gay men always have a sexual agenda. This disconnect—between gay men wanting a friendship without sex being a possibility and heterosexual men assuming that gay men always have a sexual agenda—may serve as a unique barrier to cross-orientation friendship formation in men.

Our thematic analysis suggests that heterosexual men and some gay men value similar personality and interests as the main drivers for seeking out friendships. This supports previous research by Baiocco et al. (2014) that found that heterosexual men were more likely to engage in friendships based on similarities than nonheterosexual participants. There were some unique differences in the ways in which participants responded based on their sexual orientation. One possible explanation for this could be that gay men have had to consider these issues more than straight men have. During the coming out process, and for many subsequent social interactions, gay men often have to reflect upon how their sexual orientation will be received by other men. This is especially true from a sexual

scripting perspective where these men would have had to redefine their scripts around masculinity while now embracing a gay identity (i.e., What does it mean to be a gay men?, How do gay men behave socially and sexually?, What are the norms in the community?).

Negative past experiences or fear around discrimination kept many of the gay respondents from seeking these relationships. The responses from these men appeared to be tinged with an enduring undertone of fear and discomfort; yet, there was also a general openness expressed as well. This inherent conflict may very well be representative of the current social discourse on sexual and gender minorities. Although it also sheds light upon visibility, acceptance, and integration, there may still be enduring marginalization, discrimination, and stigmatization experienced by men in these friendships. Overall, the gay men's responses included more acknowledgment of their role as sexual minorities while still maintaining an aspect of enthusiasm and hopefulness around continuing this conversation.

The heterosexual male participants were quite curious and inclusive in their responses as well. Likewise, some respondents stated that they did not care about this topic and will befriend whomever they want to befriend. These answers could be interpreted as discomfort or fear on the part of the respondent, extending homophobic attitudes. But they could also be considered the beginning of an ongoing discourse around masculinity and friendship. Current masculinity scripts tend to evoke fear, homophobia, and discomfort, and for some of the respondents, this could have been the first time they were ever asked to actively reflect on such a topic. In addition, it is important to consider that while individuals may report that sexual orientation does not impact who they engage in friendships with, that may not always be reflected in their actual behavior. One important consideration is that despite people being willing to engage in cross-orientation friendships, there may still be stigma and prejudices that could appear throughout the friendship given that the scripts of these friendships are not overly clear or openly depicted. Hence, by engaging in such friendships, discussions can be had about preconceived notions and beliefs about gay men and their sexuality, as well as masculinity regardless of sexual orientation.

These distinctions shed light on the differences in the men's lived experiences around masculinity and male friendship. Heterosexual men do not need to deliberately consider their relationships with other men in the same way that gay men do (e.g., also do not have to reassess their scripts around masculinity and identity), and this has impacts on how they responded to the research question in this study. As mentioned above, during the first iterations of the data, the responses and emergent themes were organized by sexual orientation. But after multiple iterations the commonalities among all respondents was clear, and the original thematic structure was reorganized to remove sexual orientation. This merging of the themes is a meaningful representation of what is being seen in society; a slow divergence from earlier dichotomous attitudes—men should be divided by orientation—and a subsequent shift toward more inclusive attitudes about friendships between sexual minority and majority groups. From a scripting perspective, this would also suggest that men are more willing to alter and redefine their notions of masculinity and behavior, which is very promising.

Although this study offers insights into men's contemporary attitudes about entering cross-orientation friendships with other men, its limitations should be noted. In this study, the responses

were constrained by the use of the open-ended question in the survey. And while this structure format allowed for a larger sample size, responses cannot be probed or elaborated upon as is possible in interviews. With relation to the sample, there are more American participants than Canadian and more heterosexual participants than gay participants. Though a more balanced sample would be ideal, it was not feasible using Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

Including other demographic variables in future studies (i.e., SES, religion) may provide further insight into the unique barriers to forming these friendships. Similarly, this study does not provide data on other members of the LGBTQ+ community, and though that was not the aim of this study, investigations into how genderqueer individuals or transgendered men feel about these friendships could provide even more nuanced results around this research area. Exploration of lesbian and bisexual females is also worthy of future consideration. Furthermore, as noted in the methods, 12.2% of straight-identified men reported at least one consensual same-sex experience. This warrants further investigation in regard to sexual fluidity and sexual identity and how such variations may impact attitudes toward male friendships.

Many of the men in the current study were open to entering friendships with men of the opposite sexual orientation than themselves, but there appears to be a general acknowledgement that—as a society—it is not universally accepted yet. Further studies could aim to assess the level of openness to befriending a cross-orientation person by asking more general questions about friendship without a clear focus on sexual orientation. Assessing someone's opinion on whether they would or would not do something (i.e., engage in a friendship with a specific person or population) may cause them to say what they think they should say. Although anonymity in this study attempted to circumvent this, we may not have captured the full complexity of their affect and attitudes. Future research could aim to minimize the tendency for social desirability by utilizing different methods for data collection, such as interviews or dyads. Dyadic data would also allow for heterosexual and gay men who are already in these relationships to discuss their experiences, perceived friendship quality, and overall comfort.

Given the mean age of the participants in this study, it would be advantageous to conduct a similar study using an older adult population. Given their unique cultural upbringing and entrenched social attitudes, this cohort could possibly reveal different results from the current study in the way of openness to cross-orientation friendships. Older gay men would have also potentially experienced even more oppression than the younger generations, as well as major changes in legislation (i.e., during the AIDS epidemic, same-sex marriage, sodomy laws) that would have influenced their attitudes around friendships with heterosexual men. Likewise, heterosexual men of this age range may have biased feelings or judgments about cross-orientation friendships as well, or really any relationships that do not fall within their socially and culturally constructed scripts around hegemonic masculinity. We had initially anticipated that there may be difference in attitudes based on geographic location as LGBTQ+ rights have advanced quicker in Canada (Marzullo, 2015; Rayside & Wilcox, 2011), but no such differences were observed, which is encouraging. In addition, there are unique positive (e.g., the increased exposure to LGBTQ+ individuals and issues in mainstream media) and negative (e.g., an increased propensity for online bullying and harassment) considerations for current younger generations. Finally, while our sample was quite balanced

in terms of whether the friendships were formed prior to or after the gay man had come out openly, further work could explore the differences in acceptability, reasons for seeking friendship, and perceived comfort in these same-sex friendships.

## Conclusion

This study sought to participate in the conversation around the promotion and exposure of cross-orientation friendships in order to prompt further investigation in the area. The present findings are a starting point to a larger conversation on cross-orientation friendships and barriers to obtaining such friendships. Friendships are crucial for our development as individuals and as social beings (Brown, 1999; Smetana, 2006), but the ways with which men have been socialized to act in society prevent them from seeking meaningful connections with others (Klein, 2013). This tendency gets stronger as other complex variables such as gender and sexuality are added. It is important that discourses around friendship, gender, and sexuality continue so that cross-orientation friendships of all types can be normalized, accepted, and celebrated.

Nagel et al. (2015) said that friendships are fluid, in that they can be challenged and redefined. Likewise, Simon and Gagnon (1986) stated that our gendered scripts, too, can ebb and flow over time. Seeing as the qualitative findings of this study suggests that male cross-orientation relationships are becoming more commonplace and accepted in today's society; it also means that more individuals are disagreeing with aspects of the sexual scripts that have been assigned to them. Thus, future masculinity scripts may be reformulated and redefined to meet the unique needs of all men, despite their sexual orientation.

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