

# Transgender exclusion from the world of dating: Patterns of acceptance and rejection of hypothetical trans dating partners as a function of sexual and gender identity

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## Abstract

The current study sought to describe the demographic characteristics of individuals who are willing to consider a transgender individual as a potential dating partner. Participants ( $N = 958$ ) from a larger study on relationship decision-making processes were asked to select all potential genders that they would consider dating if ever seeking a future romantic partner. The options provided included cisgender men, cisgender women, trans men, trans women, and genderqueer individuals. Across a sample of heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and trans individuals, 87.5% indicated that they would not consider dating a trans person, with cisgender heterosexual men and women being most likely to exclude trans persons from their potential dating pool. Individuals identifying as bisexual, queer, trans, or non-binary were most likely to indicate a willingness to date a trans person. However, even among those willing to date trans persons, a pattern of masculine privileging and transfeminine exclusion appeared, such that participants were disproportionately willing to date trans men, but not trans women, even if doing so was counter to their self-identified sexual and gender identity (e.g., a lesbian dating a trans

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man but not a trans woman). The results are discussed within the context of the implications for trans persons seeking romantic relationships and the pervasiveness of cisgenderism and transmisogyny.

### **Keywords**

Femmephobia, masculine privileging, trans dating, transgender exclusion, transgender relationships, transmisogyny, transprejudice

Historically, the boundaries of love have been dictated by social mores. The notion of having a personal choice in selecting a romantic partner is relatively modern, with marrying for love only being commonplace over the past 250 years (Coontz, 2006). In cultures where individual choice and the romantic notions of “finding the one” have come to predominate, mate selection is still frequently restricted by social values and prejudices. As recently as the 1950s, it was considered immoral, and even disgusting, for individuals of different races to date. Concerns about social class differences have formed the plot of many Hollywood love stories (e.g., *The Notebook*), and society has only recently begun to accept relationships between two men or two women. In general, it would seem that as time goes on, society continues to stretch the boundaries around who may be considered an acceptable dating partner. We no longer routinely snub relationships between two individuals of different social classes, of the same-sex, or of different races. Yet, even when society becomes more accepting of seemingly star-crossed lovers, our own individual preferences for dating partners can remain tainted by general societal attitudes. One such attitude that may be restricting the roll call of those we consider acceptable dating partners may be cisgenderism.

Cisgenderism, or cissexism, refers to the ideology that views cisgender identities as natural and normal, thereby delegitimizing trans identities and expressions (Serano, 2007). Although acceptance of transgender individuals has been increasing over the past decade in North America, the transgender and non-binary community is still considerably marginalized within society. In addressing societal acceptance of marginalized groups, some have pointed to the inclusion of marginalized individuals within socially sanctioned relationships as an indicator of social inclusion. Referencing acceptance of racial diversity, Reginald Bibby (2007) states “there is probably no better index of racial and cultural integration than intermarriage” (p. 1). Applying the same logic to transgender individuals, an indicator of increased acceptance and true societal inclusion (beyond mere tolerance) would be the number of cisgender individuals currently in relationships with transgender individuals. While this information is not available as a census statistic, it may be possible to approximate such a metric by examining willingness to date transgender individuals. The current article explores response patterns of cisgender and transgender individuals of diverse sexual identities (i.e., heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer) to the question of which genders they would be willing to date in a future, hypothetical relationship.

In an ideal world, free of cisgenderism and transprejudice, an individual’s gender identity (transgender vs. cisgender) would not factor into whether they were viewed as a

viable dating partner. In such a world, dating decisions would be premised on preexisting desires, such that an individual interested in women would be interested in trans women and cisgender women. Of course, in a truly ideal society, perhaps our very understanding of sex, gender, and desire would be quite different, making it impossible to even predict who would be attracted to whom (see Bettcher, 2014; Better & Simula, 2015; van Anders, 2015). However, for the purposes of this article, we more simply define an ideal world as one in which an individual's gender identity is acknowledged and respected, such that a trans woman is viewed as a woman and a trans man is viewed as a man. To the extent that we may already be living in such a world, we would expect people to indicate equal willingness to date the trans counterparts to the gender(s) to whom they are usually attracted. In other words, a heterosexual man or lesbian woman, usually attracted to women, would also indicate a willingness to date trans women. The distance between our current reality and this hypothetical ideal world may be identified by the extent to which individuals select partners in ways that partially or completely invalidate trans identities (Bettcher, 2006). Consequently, individuals' decisions to include or exclude trans persons from their dating pool may be a useful, albeit imperfect, metric of the extent to which cisgenderism is still restricting the boundaries of acceptable romantic pairings.

Beyond serving as a gauge of transgender inclusion and cisgenderism within society, willingness to date trans individuals provides insight into the social support resources available to trans people themselves. Romantic relationships are one of the most important sources of social support for individuals, providing elements of support not often accessible within different relationship types (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Consequently, if individuals are unwilling to consider trans people as dating partners, trans individuals may lack access to important forms of social support. While there is not a large body of literature on trans dating experiences, there is evidence that concerns about dating, finding a partner, and coming out as trans to a new partner are all common stressors for transgender and gender diverse individuals (Hines, 2006; Melendez & Pinto, 2007).

## **Relationship experiences of trans persons**

Once in a relationship, trans individuals often experience benefits similar to those reported for cisgender individuals, such as better mental health and lower levels of depression (Bockting, Benner, & Coleman, 2009; Dargie, Blair, Pukall, & Coyle, 2014; Meier, Sharp, Michonski, Babcock, & Fitzgerald, 2013). However, the benefits are sometimes seen only in trans men (Iantaffi & Bockting, 2011). The heightened level of risk faced by trans women dating cisgender heterosexual men may contribute to trans women being less likely to benefit from romantic relationships. Trans women's concerns regarding when, how, and whether to "out" oneself to a partner may attenuate the potential for positive relational benefits (Iantaffi & Bockting, 2011). Along these lines, trans women are more likely than trans men to report anxiety concerning a potential dating partner's response to learning of their identity, discrimination from potential partners, and a lack of self-acceptance (Riggs, von Doussa, & Power, 2015).

## **Cisgender partners of trans individuals**

The majority of existing research on cisgender partners of trans individuals has focused on relationships that preexist one partner's transition. As a result, we know more about how couples evolve through the process of a gender transition than we do about individuals who begin relationships with others who have already transitioned or identified as transgender (Brown, 2010; Hines, 2006; Meier et al., 2013).

Consequently, research has often focused on how relationships change throughout a transitioning process. Some studies have examined changes in sexual desire and sexual practices (Brown, 2009, 2010) and the related experiences of cisgender partners (re)negotiating their sexual identities as a result of their existing partner transitioning (Brown, 2009; Pfeffer, 2014). For example, lesbian-identified cisgender partners describe the need to adapt to the experience of "passing as straight," as their previously same-sex, lesbian, relationship evolves into one that is externally viewed as heterosexual (Pfeffer, 2008, 2014).

Research on cisgender male partners of trans women has focused on questions relating to the impact of stigma and transprejudice on the relationship and the mental well-being of both partners (Gamarel, Reisner, Laurenceau, Nemoto, & Operario, 2014). Although the trans partner is often the main target of prejudice and stigma, cisgender partners can experience "stigma by association." For cisgender men dating trans women, the more the men experience stigma by association, the more likely they are to also report psychological distress and reduced relationship quality. Sources of stigma include simply being associated with a trans woman as well as being presumed gay by outsiders. Given the high levels of stigma by association reported in past studies (Gamarel et al., 2014; Reisner et al., 2015), it is conceivable that cisgender men may even anticipate experiences of stigma when considering the possibility of dating a trans woman and may, therefore, avoid seeking trans partners.

Although it is important to explore the experiences of preexisting cisgender partners of trans individuals, we also need to learn more about how trans individuals are viewed before a relationship even begins. We currently know very little about what the potential dating pool looks like for trans individuals seeking romantic relationships. What we know about individuals who stay with or leave a partner who transitions may not equate to describing the qualities of individuals who may view trans individuals as potential dating partners for new relationships. The current study sheds some light on this question by examining the characteristics of those who report a willingness to date trans individuals.

## **Current article**

The current study grew out of a larger study on dating decisions related to experiences of social support for relationships (Blair & Pukall, 2015). In that study, participants were asked to indicate which genders they would potentially consider dating in the future. The current analysis is, therefore, a preliminary and exploratory examination of dating patterns within and outside LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) communities, with a specific focus on trans inclusion. We sought to determine

whether dating patterns were inclusive of trans individuals and whether this inclusion was extended equally to trans men and trans women.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, no specific hypotheses were tested. Despite this, it is possible to specify the patterns of responding that would be indicative of an influence of prevailing societal attitudes and prejudices on decisions to include or exclude trans individuals from one's dating pool. To the extent that recent advancements in acceptance of gender diversity and the provision of rights to trans individuals have trickled down into individual attitudes, we would expect to see a large number of participants include trans men and women as potential dating partners, in accordance with their preexisting sexual identities. In other words, if transgender individuals are truly being included in society with their gender identities being viewed as authentic, we would expect heterosexual men and lesbian women to be open to dating trans women, and, similarly, we would expect heterosexual women and gay men to be interested in dating trans men. Further, we would expect to see these patterns among both trans and cisgender individuals.

It may, however, be overly optimistic to expect response patterns unmarred by cissexist attitudes and transprejudice. After all, interracial relationships have been legal for just over half a century in the U.S., yet only 10% of current U.S. marriages are interracial (Livingston & Brown, 2017). Much less time has passed since the emergence of any form of protection or acceptance of trans individuals and, to a large extent, trans individuals are still fighting for basic human rights and dignities. Trans women, in particular, face one of the highest rates of violent victimization at present and, thus, a more likely pattern of responses would be one indicating that dating decisions are still influenced by trans-exclusionary attitudes and cissexist views of gender. Under such circumstances, we would expect very few participants to indicate willingness to date trans individuals and, where interest is indicated, it is possible that such interest will effectively "misgender" potential dating partners by prioritizing sex assigned at birth over gender identity (e.g., a lesbian woman being interested in trans men but not trans women).

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were recruited to the study using online advertisements, listserv messages, on-campus announcements, in-print magazine ads, snowballing methods, and invitations sent to previous study participants. A total of 960 individuals completed the questions relevant to the current analysis; however, two individuals indicated that they were "not inclined to have romantic relationships" and thus were not included in the current analyses, leaving a final sample size of 958. The majority of participants identified as cisgender women (61.1%), followed by cisgender men (37.1%), trans women (.7%,  $n = 7$ ), non-binary (.7%,  $n = 7$ ), or trans men (.4%,  $n = 4$ ). For the majority of analyses, gender was assessed inclusively, such that trans men were included with cisgender men and trans women were included with cisgender women.<sup>1</sup> However, where relevant, we have also separated participants by gender identity in order to more closely examine how gender identity may be associated with response patterns.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 81, with a mean age of 25.51 ( $SD = 9.29$ ). The majority of participants resided in Canada (76.6%) or the U.S. (19.7%). At the time of participating in the study, most participants were in some form of a dating relationship (65.9%) or were single (32.7%). Roughly half of the sample identified as non-religious (50.1%), and the majority of participants did not yet have a university degree (59.5%), although 56.2% of the sample was currently enrolled in university. Participants also indicated their self-reported sexual identities, with 24.4% indicating gay or lesbian, 63.5% indicating heterosexual or straight, and 12.2% indicating bisexual, queer, or two-spirit.<sup>2</sup>

## Measures

**Demographics.** Participants provided a number of personal and relational demographics, including their gender (male, female, trans man, trans woman, two-spirit), age, nationality, sexual identity (gay, straight, lesbian, queer, bisexual, two-spirit), country of residence, ethnicity, religion, religiosity (using a 4-point scale, from *not at all religious* to *very religious*), employment status, and highest level of education completed.

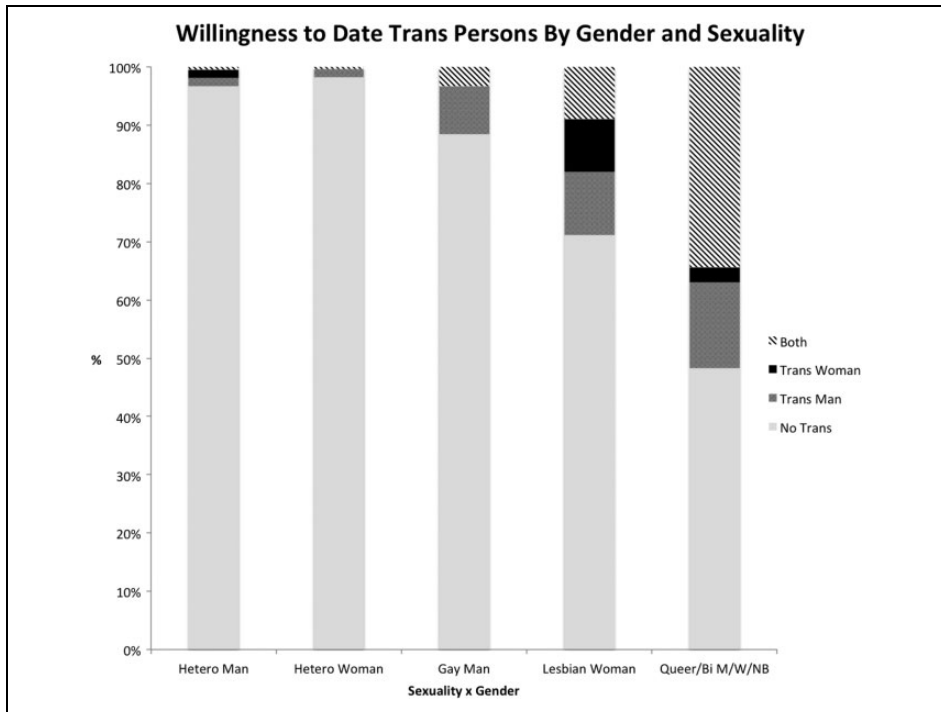
**Who would you consider dating?** Participants were asked to indicate which genders they had previously dated and which genders they would *consider* dating in the future. In a single question, participants *selected all that applied* from the following list of options: cisgender man, cisgender woman, trans man, trans woman, or gender queer. A definition of cisgender was provided for participants as follows: “A cisgender person is an individual for whom their current gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth — or the gender most commonly associated with their biological sex.”

## Procedure

Participants in the current study were part of a larger online survey assessing responses to hypothetical scenarios in which friends or family members provided disapproval for their romantic relationship (see Blair & Pukall, 2015 for details of the larger study). The study was completed online, and participants received participation points as they progressed through the surveys, as per Blair & Holmberg (2008). Points could be entered into prize draws (1 point = 1 entry) or could be donated to a variety of different charities (1,000 points = US\$1 donation; see <http://www.drkarenblair.com/charity/>).

## Results

Of the 958 participants, 87.5% did not select a trans person when responding to the question concerning *all* possible genders that they would consider dating (see Figure 1). The remaining 12.5% indicated that they would consider dating a trans man, a trans woman, or both. The results section will initially describe the demographic differences between those who indicated that they would or would not consider dating a trans person. The remainder of the analyses focuses on the response patterns within the 12.5% who indicated that they would consider dating a trans person. Unless otherwise noted,



**Figure 1.** Percentage of each group (sexuality  $\times$  gender) indicating a willingness to consider dating no trans persons, trans men, trans women, or both.

Note: Queer/Bi/M/W/NB = Queer. Bi = bisexual; M = man; W = woman; NB = non-binary.

analyses based on gender and sexual identity are based on self-identified sexuality and gender, with trans men being included with men, trans women being included with women, and non-binary individuals being included with bisexual and queer men and women. For all  $\chi^2$  analyses presented, the expected cell frequencies were greater than five. If this assumption was not met, a Fisher's exact test was run.

### Group comparisons based on willingness to date a trans person

Individuals who indicated that they would consider dating a trans person were older ( $M = 28.83$ ,  $SD = 10.42$ ) than those who would not ( $M = 24.94$ ,  $SD = 8.98$ ), a difference which was statistically significant,  $t(174.61) = -4.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $MD = -3.88$ , 95% CI  $[-5.73$  to  $-2.03]$ . Potentially as a result of being older, those who would consider dating a trans person also tended to be more likely to hold a university degree, with 20.2% indicating that they had a university degree compared to 10.8% of those who would not date a trans person. The difference was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 16.458$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .131$ ,  $p < .001$ . Willingness to date a trans person did not differ significantly by ethnicity, with 13.5% of White people and 14.8% of people of color saying they would consider dating a trans person,  $\chi^2(1) = .233$ ,  $p = .629$ . Willingness did differ

based on country, with participants from outside of Canada being more likely to indicate a willingness to date trans individuals (33% vs. 9.9%),  $\chi^2(1) = 62.09, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .271, p < .001$ . This difference, however, may be more influenced by the demographic makeup of the sample, as the majority of non-heterosexual participants were from outside of Canada ( $\chi^2(2) = 224.82, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .518, p < .001$ ; Canada: 76.3% heterosexual/straight vs. the U.S. and other countries: 20.3% heterosexual/straight<sup>3</sup>) and, as shown below, responses differed considerably as a function of sexual and gender identity.

Those who would consider dating a trans person versus those who would not differed significantly on three additional variables: sexual identity, gender identity, and religion. To assess differences across sexual identity, participants were grouped into three categories: gay/lesbian, heterosexual/straight, and bisexual/queer/two-spirit. Those identifying as queer, bisexual, or two-spirit were most likely to indicate a willingness to date trans individuals (55.2%), followed by gay men and lesbian women (23.9%), and finally, heterosexual men and women (3.1%). The group difference was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = 234.90, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .495, p < .001$ . Similarly, those identifying as transgender or non-binary were more likely than those identifying as cisgender to indicate a willingness to date trans individuals, 88.9% vs. 13.1%;  $\chi^2(1) = 81.81, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .292, p < .001$ . Finally, a larger proportion of those who were not religious (19.6%) indicated that they would consider dating a trans person, compared to only 9.1% of religious individuals,  $\chi^2(1) = 20.953, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .150, p < .001$ .

### *Response patterns of those willing to date trans individuals*

To assess the specific response patterns of participants, such as investigating whether a participant's response concerning whether they would date a trans man, a trans woman, or both aligned with their self-identified gender and sexual identity, a variable representing expected response was created. For example, a heterosexual man or lesbian woman's "expected" response would be to select a trans woman, given their general interest in dating women (see Table 1). In order to assess potential differences between actual and expected responses, an exact  $\chi^2$  goodness-of-fit test was conducted, which indicated that participants' responses differed significantly (and considerably) from the expected distribution,  $\chi^2(3) = 73,302,939, p < .001$ , exact  $p < .001$ , point probability  $< .001$ . Table 2 presents the expected and actual distribution of responses.

The overwhelming number of participants indicating unwillingness to date any trans people makes the above analysis difficult to interpret when attempting to identify specific patterns among those who will consider dating trans persons. Consequently, the analysis was rerun with only 12.5% of participants ( $n = 120$ ) who indicated a willingness to date trans people. When comparing the expected and actual distributions within this subsample, statistically significant differences were still identified,  $\chi^2(2) = 48.55, p < .001$ . While the actual numbers of participants willing to date trans men, trans women, or both remained the same, the percentages within this subsample differed, such that 40% of those willing to date a trans person were willing to date only a trans man, 13.3% were only willing to date a trans woman, and 46.7% were willing to date either a trans man or a



**Table 1.** Congruent, incongruent, and exclusionary answer options by gender and sexual identity.

	Congruent/expected answer(s)	Incongruent answer(s)	Exclusionary answer
Heterosexual man	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trans woman</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trans man</li> <li>• Both trans men and trans women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No trans people</li> </ul>
Heterosexual woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trans man</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trans woman</li> <li>• Both trans men and trans women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No trans people</li> </ul>
Gay man	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trans man</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trans woman</li> <li>• Both trans men and trans women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No trans people</li> </ul>
Lesbian woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trans woman</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trans man</li> <li>• Both trans men and trans women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No trans people</li> </ul>
Bisexual, queer, two-spirit man, woman, or non-binary individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trans men and trans women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Either trans men or trans women but not both</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No trans people</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Expected versus actual distribution of responses across full sample and subsample of individuals willing to date a trans person.

	Full sample			Subsample		
	Expected (%)	Actual (%)	Discrepancy (%)	Expected (%)	Actual (%)	Discrepancy (%)
Would date						
No trans persons	0	87.5	-87.5	n/a	n/a	
Trans man or trans woman	12.2	5.8	-6.4	50	46.7	-3.3
Trans man only <sup>a</sup>	54	5	-49	17.5	40	+22.5
Trans woman only <sup>a</sup>	33.8	1.7	-32.1	32.5	13.3	-19.2

<sup>a</sup>Only refers to within trans persons; the participant indicated they would only date trans men and not trans women. It does not refer to exclusively dating trans people to the exclusion of cisgender people. A pictorial representation of the expected versus actual distributions can be found online in the supplementary materials, <http://osf.io/mg39q>.

trans woman. Table 2 displays the expected and actual distributions of responses among the 120 participants willing to date a trans person. An examination of the residuals indicated that there were 22.5% more participants willing to date trans men than expected, 19.2% fewer participants willing to date trans women than expected, and 3.3% fewer participants willing to date both trans men and trans women than expected.

### Patterns of incongruent responses

Given the differences between the expected and actual distributions discussed above, even among the subsample of participants who indicated willingness to date a trans

**Table 3.** Response categories by sexual and gender identity.

	Exclusionary N (%)	Congruent N (%)	Incongruent N (%)
Bi/queer/non-binary participants	56 (48.3)	40 (34.5)	20 (17.2)
Lesbian women	80 (71.2)	10 (9)	22 (19.8)
Gay men	108 (88.5)	10 (8.2)	4 (3.3)
Heterosexual women	388 (98.2)	6 (1.5)	7 (1.9)
Heterosexual men	206 (96.7)	3 (1.4)	3 (1.3)

person, we sought to identify the specific patterns of incongruence leading to the different distributions. In other words, why were there more participants willing to date trans men than expected and fewer participants willing to date trans women or both trans women and trans men than expected? In order to answer this question, each participant was classified as having a congruent, incongruent, or exclusionary response (see Table 1). Congruent responses were those where a participant's selection of trans men, trans women, or both aligned with their stated sexual and gender identities. For example, a congruent response for a lesbian or heterosexual man would include a willingness to date trans women. Individuals whose response did not align with their stated sexual and gender identity were either classified as exclusionary or incongruent. Participants who did not indicate any willingness to consider dating a trans person were classified as exclusionary, while those who indicated a willingness to date a trans person that did not align with their stated sexual and gender identity were classified as incongruent. For example, a queer or bisexual individual indicating that they would only date a trans man *or* trans woman, but not both, was classified as incongruent.

A  $\chi^2$  analysis comparing response patterns (exclusionary, congruent, incongruent) across sexual and gender identity (heterosexual man, heterosexual woman, lesbian woman, gay man, queer/bi man/woman/non-binary individual) was conducted. There was a statistically significant association between participants' response patterns and their sexual and gender identity,  $\chi^2(8) = 278.53, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .381, p < .001$ . Overall, 87.5% of participants were categorized as exclusionary, 7.2% were congruent, and 5.3% were incongruent. Queer or bisexual men, women, and non-binary individuals were least likely to have an exclusionary response and were most likely to provide congruent responses. Heterosexual men and women had the highest rates of exclusionary responses, while lesbian women had the highest rates of incongruent responses. Table 3 presents the complete breakdown of exclusionary, congruent, and incongruent response patterns as a function of sexual orientation.

This analysis highlighted that while gay men and lesbian women were almost equally likely to have congruent responses (8.2% vs. 9%, respectively), lesbians were, in general, less likely to be exclusionary than gay men (71.2% vs. 88.5%). Lesbians and queer or bisexual men, women, and non-binary individuals were also more likely to be congruent than gay men (19.8% vs. 8.2%). Overall, heterosexual men and women were overwhelmingly exclusionary in their response patterns. A Fisher's exact test was run to assess how response patterns differed across gender identity (cisgender vs. transgender). Transgender individuals were significantly less likely to have an

exclusionary answer compared to cisgender individuals (16.7% vs. 88.8%) and more likely to have a congruent (55.6% vs. 6.3%) or incongruent response (27.8% vs. 4.9%) compared to cisgender individuals, Fisher's exact test = 51.06,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .302$ ,  $p < .001$ .

The final analysis attempted to identify any potential biases or patterns within the incongruent responses. As can be seen in Tables 2 and 3, there appears to be a favoring of trans men over trans women. To examine this further, we assessed the specific patterns of incongruence within each sexual/gender group. Lesbian women were most likely to have incongruent responses by either being more inclusive in their response than expected (9%) by indicating a willingness to date both trans men and trans women or by being completely incongruent through indicating only a willingness to date trans men (10.8%) but not trans women. Among queer or bisexual men, women, and non-binary individuals, a similar pattern of favoring trans men over trans women appeared, with 14.7% of incongruent participants in this group selecting only trans men, compared to 2.6% selecting only trans women. In other words, among the queer or bisexual men, women, and non-binary individuals whose self-stated sexual and gender identities would suggest an openness to dating both trans men and trans women, 85% had responses that excluded trans women from their pool of potential dating partners, while only 15% provided answers that excluded trans men as potential dating partners.

Very few gay men were classified as incongruent (3.3%). All of these participants were incongruent by indicating a willingness to date either trans men or trans women, but there were no gay men in the sample who indicated incongruence through only being interested in trans women and not trans men. Finally, among heterosexual men, 1.9% were incongruent, with 1.4% indicating a willingness to date trans men and 0.5% ( $n = 1$ ) being willing to date either a trans man or a trans woman. There was only one heterosexual woman classified as incongruent (.3%) and she indicated a willingness to date either a trans man or a trans woman.

Even among the small sample of trans-identified participants, the pattern of masculine privileging appears to continue, although we caution that these findings may not generalize, given the small sample. For example, one trans man identified as heterosexual and indicated that he would date other trans men, but not trans women (i.e., an incongruent response). Another trans man identified as gay, and had a congruent response, such that he indicated a willingness to date other trans men, but not trans women. The remaining two trans men identified as queer, with one having congruent responses and another having incongruent responses that excluded trans women (of note, this participant also excluded cis men). Three participants identified as lesbian trans women, and of these, only one indicated a willingness to date other trans women and none indicated a willingness to date trans men. All three indicated a willingness to date cis women, and two indicated a willingness to date cis men. The remaining four trans women identified as queer, and all four had congruent responses, in which they were willing to date trans men and trans women. The remaining trans participants identified their gender as simply trans, non-binary, or queer and all of these participants identified a sexual identity of queer or bisexual (or, they opted to write in "trans" within the "unlisted" box for sexual identity). Of these seven participants, one participant was unwilling to date any other trans people, three had congruent responses (willing to date trans men and trans women),

and three were categorized as incongruent, with two of these being unwilling to date trans women and one being unwilling to date trans men.

## **Discussion**

The current study sought to examine the extent to which trans individuals are viewed as potential dating partners by a sample of predominantly cisgender individuals of various sexual identities. The overwhelming pattern that emerged from the data was that very few individuals, especially among cisgender heterosexuals, consider trans persons as potential future dating partners. Willingness to consider dating trans persons differed considerably across sexual identities, with those identifying as queer or bisexual being the most likely to include trans persons within their pool of potential partners, perhaps due to the fact that they have already expanded their view and understanding of gender simply by identifying as queer or bisexual. Beyond comparing the likelihood of including trans persons as potential dating partners across sexual and gender identities, we also compared the extent to which the participants in this sample provided responses that aligned with their own self-identified genders and sexual identities. This process resulted in categorizing participant responses as exclusionary, congruent, or incongruent. Our discussion will focus on the meaning of each of these categories as well as the implications that each has for understanding the challenges faced by trans men and trans women when it comes to seeking and building romantic relationships.

### *Exclusion of trans persons*

Across sexual and gender identities, 87.5% of participants were classified as having an exclusionary response, meaning that they had not selected either trans men or trans women as potential dating partners. Exclusion was highest among cisgender heterosexual men and women, with only a handful indicating a willingness to date trans individuals. Gay men were the next most likely to provide exclusionary responses, followed by lesbians, and finally queer and bisexual men, women, and non-binary individuals. Nearly three quarters of lesbians provided exclusionary responses compared to approximately half of the queer and bisexual men, women, and non-binary individuals. Consequently, even though certain identities were associated with a greater likelihood of being willing to date trans persons, exclusion remained the norm.

There are a number of reasons that might explain such high rates of excluding trans persons from potential dating pools. Perhaps the most salient are cisnormativity, cisgenderism, transphobia, and a general habituation to excluding trans persons from all areas of social life. Cisnormativity has been defined as “the expectation that all people are cissexual, that those assigned male at birth always grow up to be men and those assigned female at birth always grow up to be women” (Bauer et al., 2009, p. 356). This assumption shapes social attitudes and activities thereby influencing the ways that trans people navigate the social world. By operating on cisnormative assumptions, social worlds and systems are ill equipped for the presence of trans people. The current data demonstrate that this exclusion extends to the parameters cisgender individuals place around their prospective dating partners and that we are, therefore, quite a ways off from

what Bibby (2007) would recognize as a society that has fully integrated its trans and gender diverse citizens.

Given the vehemence with which issues such as equal access to gender-appropriate washrooms is opposed by some (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014), it is not surprising that there would also be a large segment of society unwilling to date a trans person. However, although anti-trans sentiments, including transphobia and cisgenderism, likely play a large role in the current findings, there are additional, somewhat less malicious, reasons that may explain the patterns observed in the current study.

Although participants were provided with a definition of cisgender and transgender, some participants may not have read or understood these terms and, therefore, their answers may not perfectly reflect their intentions or how they would behave if faced with the opportunity to date a trans person. Similarly, even if they understood or were vaguely familiar with the terms, they may still have had questions or uncertainties about precisely what it would mean to date a trans man or a trans woman (in practice and in terms of their own self-identification). A lack of familiarity with the realities of trans identities may have led participants to make certain assumptions concerning the ability to procreate. Of course, it should also be noted that when selecting a cisgender partner, it is not immediately obvious whether the individual is fertile or infertile. Future research should ask participants about the importance of reproductive options when selecting a partner. Transprejudice could be distinguished from personal procreation desires through determining whether perceived infertility is used as a basis for excluding potential trans and cisgender partners, or only trans partners.

At present, we know very little about what the average cisgender person knows or thinks of trans bodies. Trans scholars have commented on cisgender people's preoccupation with the sexual anatomy of trans people, relating it to a form of cissexist sexualization that ultimately reduces trans people to the state of their genitals (Serano, 2007). Considering this preoccupation with the genitals of trans people, what do cisgender participants imagine in terms of trans bodies, and how might this impact their consideration of trans people as potential dating partners? While it is important to be accepting of individuals' identities regardless of their anatomy, when it comes to real-life dating decisions, knowledge of, and questions about, trans bodies may be a pivotal factor in understanding the willingness of some to date trans partners. In other words, combined with the cisgender privilege of simply not needing to consider trans persons as potential dating partners in order to have a sufficiently large dating pool, sheer ignorance of transgender identities may be a very likely explanation for exclusionary response patterns. It is important to state, however, that while ignorance may play a role in the high rates of exclusionary responses, such ignorance is still indicative of widespread cisgenderism and cis-privilege within today's society.

Finally, even among the trans-identified participants, there was still evidence of exclusionary and incongruent response patterns. This may be due to internalized cisgenderism and feeling that one's own gender identity will be best affirmed by dating a cisgender person of the gender of one's desire (e.g., a heterosexual trans man dating a cisgender heterosexual woman). Future research should more clearly investigate the reasons that individuals do not view trans folks as potential dating partners in order to more clearly delineate whether interventions aimed at increasing factual information or reducing negative biases may be more likely to increase willingness to date trans

individuals (see McDermott et al., 2018, for an example of an intervention that uses information and prejudice reducing techniques to ameliorate transprejudice).

While all of the potential reasons for being unwilling to view a trans person as a potential dating partner are less than ideal, the exclusion category may, in some ways, offer the greatest opportunity for intervention and change. As stated, more research is needed to clearly identify and understand the reasons behind people's unwillingness to date trans people. If a lack of knowledge is a primary reason, then providing public education and resources could substantially reduce the exclusion of trans people from dating opportunities. While education often aims to increase tolerance and inclusion, simply increasing acceptance in public places, such as schoolyards, workplaces, and washrooms is ultimately insufficient. Although this type of inclusion is important and, in fact, crucial for the survival and general well-being of trans folks, it is equally important to consider the extent to which trans folks are included in broader social systems, such as dating and relationships, given that relationships are an important source of social support and well-being (Blair, Holmberg, & Pukall, 2018; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Holmberg & Blair, 2016).

### *Congruent responses*

Providing a congruent response required participants to consider dating options based on a potential partner's expressed gender identity (see Table 1 for the congruent response options). Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the congruent responses was that, even among trans, queer, and bisexual participants, the percentage of congruent answers was still well below 100%. However, the failure to have a congruent response does not necessarily imply increased exclusionary practices. For example, in some cases, failed congruency was the result of being overly inclusive and being open to dating trans men and trans women when one's sexual or gender identity did not predict such a response.

To the extent that congruent responses would be "desired" or preferable<sup>4</sup> in terms of building a world that is more inclusive of trans identities, the current data suggest that society still has a long way to go. Across all groups, congruent responses tended to be the least common, with the exception of transgender individuals, for whom the congruent response was the most common, yet still not universal. Future research should also examine whether those providing congruent responses already possess greater knowledge or understanding of diverse gender identities. Ultimately, increasing the proportion of the population who provides congruent responses could provide one of the greatest reductions in trans persons' apprehension about the dating process by providing a level of confidence concerning the general norm turning toward inclusion rather than exclusion.

The overall lack of congruency among participants might also speak to the failures and arbitrariness of systems of sexual classification (Sedgwick, 2008). Considering the diversity of human sexuality and sexual expression, why do categories of sexuality hinge on sex and gender, as opposed to desired erotic and sexual practices? This question is particularly poignant when considering how sexual classification is neither natural nor universal, but rather historically and culturally specific (Foucault, 1978; Katz, 2007; McIntosh, 1968). Moreover, despite normative heterosexual scripts that claim sexual orientation is static and fixed (Fischer, 2013), sexual orientation is more accurately

described as fluid (Diamond, 2014; Diamond, Dickenson, & Blair, 2017), or in a constant state of (re)negotiation (Brown, 2009; Pfeffer, 2014). Perhaps, the lack of congruency among participants, and the subsequent magnitude of incongruent responses, is ultimately indicative of the fraying of a formerly rigid binary system of sexual classification (van Anders, 2015).

### *Incongruent responses*

The incongruent responses are the most interesting, from a theoretical perspective, in that participants indicated a willingness to consider dating trans individuals, but did so in a way that was either overly inclusive based on their stated gender and sexual identity or selectively exclusionary. When the norm is clearly to be exclusionary across the board, why would some participants provide overly inclusive responses or selectively exclusionary responses that contradict their stated sexual identities? The answer may depend on the intricacies of individual sexual and gender identities and their subsequent lived experiences. We shall discuss four potential explanations: biological determinism, participants' lived experiences, masculine privileging, and sexual fluidity.

*Biological determinism.* In the current sample, 10.8% of the lesbians were classified as incongruent because they were willing to date trans men but not trans women. How should these responses be interpreted? One option is to view these responses as exemplifying a form of cisgenderism or biological determinism, as it would appear that the participants are selecting potential dating partners based on their sex as assigned at birth rather than their authentic or actual gender identity (i.e., effectively misgendering trans men as some form of woman). Otherwise, why would a lesbian (a woman interested in other women) indicate a willingness to date a trans man but not a trans woman — or a trans man but not a cisgender man? Indeed, Serano (2009) specifically denotes lesbian women's willingness to date trans men, based on viewing trans men as being assigned female at birth, as a form of trans invalidation.

*Lived experiences.* While one may be tempted to explain the high rate of incongruent responses among the lesbians in the current sample as cissexist, we caution against such an interpretation of these data. Such a conclusion would be overly simplistic and ignorant of the realities of lesbian herstories and the complexities of gender (e.g., Meir et al., 2013). While biologically determinist views of gender likely play a role in some, or all instances of incongruence, another likely contributor is the lived experience of having dated partners assigned female at birth who have transitioned either during or after the relationship, thereby providing some lesbian women with the experience of having initially begun a same-sex relationship that ultimately turned into a mixed-sex relationship with a trans man (Pfeffer, 2008). This experience or, perhaps just the awareness of the potential for this experience based on the experience of peers, may have led some lesbian participants to indicate openness to dating trans men but not trans women. In other words, the lesbian women in the sample who responded in an incongruent manner may have lived experience with having had a past (or current) partner undergo a gender affirmative transition, demonstrating how intimate bonds can often move beyond

boundaries of identity (Canoy, 2015; McDermott, 2010). Indeed, past research has examined the experiences of lesbian women whose partners pursue a gender affirming transition while in the midst of a relationship, often resulting in the lesbian partner reconfiguring her own understanding of her sexuality and lesbian identity in an attempt to continue the relationship with her now trans masculine partner (Pfeffer, 2008; Riggs et al., 2015).

*Masculine privileging.* Masculine privileging, or the tendency to devalue feminine embodiments, especially within the queer community (Blair & Hoskin, 2016; Hoskin, 2017; Serano, 2007) provides another way of interpreting incongruent response patterns within the sample. For example, despite expecting queer and bisexual men and women to indicate an openness to date both trans men and trans women, those with incongruent responses were much more likely to exclude trans women than trans men.

Indeed, the overarching pattern across the incongruent responses of all participants appears to be one of the transfeminine exclusions, which may highlight the consequences of widespread transmisogyny (i.e., transphobia particularly targeting trans women) and femmephobia (Hoskin, 2017; Serano, 2007). Narrative-based scholarship highlights the exclusionary practices of dating within LGBTQ communities (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002). In particular, individuals who are, or who are perceived to be, feminine are often excluded from LGBTQ notions of desirability (Hoskin, 2017). For example, some scholars have noted the tendency for gay men and lesbian women to place a greater value on masculinity in determining what is considered desirable (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Serano, 2013). Gay men have been found to desire masculine partners while explicitly stating disinterest in feminine partners (Miller, 2015). Feminine lesbians often experience in-group discrimination and exclusion as a result of their gender expression (Blair & Hoskin, 2016). Consequently, the tendency for participants in the current sample to favor dating trans men over trans women, even when doing so contravened their own self-identified sexual identity, may be a further indication of masculine privileging and femmephobia within the LGBTQ community.

*Sexual fluidity.* Incongruent responses may also be indicative of sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2014; Diamond et al., 2017), such that predictions along the lines of congruent and incongruent may lack meaning for those who view their own sexuality and attractions as more fluid. However, it should be noted that the fluidity in our sample, if that is how the overly inclusive incongruent responses should be viewed, rarely extended to trans women. The number of participants providing such responses was relatively small and occurred when gay men, lesbian women, or heterosexual men or women indicated that they would date both trans men and trans women, despite their sexual and gender identity suggesting an interest in only men or women, and not both. Perhaps, these participants were more knowledgeable about gender diversity and, therefore, more open to various gender expressions (van Anders, 2015) in addition to being more sexually fluid. Alternatively, participants providing such answers may have done so due to a motivation to appear unbiased. Future research should explore the reasoning behind participants' stated dating preferences in order to provide a clearer understanding of the motivations for overly inclusive answers.



### *Limitations and future research*

To the best of our knowledge, the current study was the first to examine willingness to date trans men and women within a sample of individuals with diverse sexual and gender identities. While this is a novel addition to the literature, the study is not without its limitations. The study was not specifically designed to address this question, but rather was part of a larger LGBTQ-inclusive study (Blair, 2016) in which this particular question was used to ensure participants received the appropriate questionnaires throughout the remainder of the study. Future research should go further by including open-ended questions to examine the reasoning behind participants' selections.

There are a number of reasons that participants' answers may not be an accurate representation of how they would actually make a decision, if provided the opportunity to date a trans person. It is not always immediately apparent that someone is, or identifies as, transgender, meaning that some participants may have previously considered dating, or felt attraction toward, individuals who were trans without actually knowing this to be true. As noted within the lesbian portion of the sample, it may be that individuals cannot accurately answer this question until they have had some form of personal experience to inform their responses. While this may be valid, a truly inclusive society would not require personal experience with dating a trans person in order to view trans people as potential dating partners.

Finally, many participants may not have given the question careful consideration, although this may be viewed as one of the study's strengths and limitations. As a limitation, it may mean that if given more time to consider the question or more detailed explanations of terms, participants may have provided different responses. It may also have served as a strength, in that the "housekeeping" nature of the question in determining the branching of the survey may provide a better representation of someone's initial or intuitive response concerning who they are willing to consider dating under hypothetical circumstances.

The responses may have also been influenced by social desirability bias, such that overly inclusive responses may be representing individuals who simply did not want to appear exclusionary. However, the fact that the study did not purport to be about transgender dating may have reduced the potential for social desirability biases. Future research in this area will prove very fruitful in understanding the nuances of how individuals construe diverse genders and transgender identities when considering their own dating lives and defining the parameters of their own dating pool.

### **Conclusion**

As a culture, we often make the mistake of assuming that sexual subjectivity is "self-governing, autonomous, and free from external constraints" (Canoy, 2015, p. 943), yet queer theory, critical heterosexualities, and the coercion of compulsory heterosexuality teach us otherwise (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980). Why should the reluctance to date trans individuals be treated differently than the coercive and regulating effects of compulsory heterosexuality? Critical Heterosexuality studies bring to bare what is lost when normative categories, such as heterosexuality, are taken-for-granted and viewed as an innate, erotic drive untouched by "the norms and regulations" of society (Fischer, 2013, p. 501). In other

words, critical heterosexualities encourage questioning the inevitability with which we view the systems of heteronormativity (such as cisgenderism; Butler, 1990). Accordingly, by making heterosexuality visible as a social construct, additional gendered and sexual power relations are also brought to light (Fischer, 2013). These power relations not only involve the hierarchal positioning of men over women but also heterosexuality above homosexuality and, ultimately, cisgender identities above transgender identities.

Choices in romantic partnerships are frequently overlooked and chalked-up to a mere matter of personal preference. Through dissecting dating choices, the current article illuminates some of the mechanisms that uphold gender inequality, including cisgenderism and transmisogyny. According to feminist scholars, transmisogyny is symptomatic of the current gender order and demonstrates the continued role of power relations in shaping lived-realities. For example, heterosexuality is underscored by the assumption that men and women are distinct and “complementary” beings (Fischer, 2013, p. 502). Valuing masculine qualities and devaluing feminine qualities maintains this distinction. Within the current article, there is evidence to suggest both the privileging of “complementary” gender constructs of male and female (i.e., cisgender), in addition to the privileging of the tools that maintain these distinctions, such as masculinity. Whether inter-racial, same-sex, or trans inclusive, relationships illustrate the continued purview of normativity in forming social worlds, policing access to support, and dictating the boundaries of love.

Ultimately, then, the data reported herein do not paint an uplifting picture with respect to dating opportunities for transgender and gender diverse individuals. Rather, the current article illustrates the great degree of progress still to be made in moving toward a society that is truly inclusive of diverse gender identities. We leave the reader with what we see as the three key take away points that emerged from this study.

1. The overwhelming majority of the sample did not view trans individuals as viable dating partners, and this was especially true among cisgender heterosexual participants.
2. Those who were most likely to include transgender individuals within their pool of prospective dating partners were individuals who had already defied typical gender norms and binaries by self-identifying as queer, bisexual, trans, or non-binary.
3. When individuals are willing to consider including trans persons within their pool of prospective dating partners, there appears to be a bias toward including trans men but not trans women, even if doing so is counter to one’s self-identified sexual and/or gender identity.

While everyone has a right to freely choose whom they will or will not date, examining the generalized patterns of who society collectively excludes from the dating pool can help to lay bare existing societal prejudices. Just as other partner preferences that specify specific races, body types, or other features (e.g., height, labia size, physical ability) have been critiqued for supporting normative ideals of beauty and exposing societal biases favoring those who are thin, light-skinned, and able-bodied (Glaser, Robnett, & Feliciano, 2009; Han, 2008; Hunter, 2002; Jha & Adelman, 2009; Mullinax, Herbenick, Schick, Sanders, & Reece, 2015; Vaughn, McEntee, Schoen, & McGrady,

2015), we must also consider how patterns of excluding trans individuals (and their bodies) from the realm of dating expose continuing cisgenderism and transmisogyny within society. If nothing else, perhaps, our general willingness to excuse discriminatory preferences when it comes to trans bodies can help us to further highlight and understand how systems of beauty, race, and cisgenderism are ingrained into what it means to be an “autonomous” individual who “chooses” who they are willing to date. While we would not argue for limiting a person’s freedom to choose their dating partners in any way, we do suggest that by closely examining generalized patterns of “preferences” and exclusions, we can better understand the societal forces that continue to influence the formation of acceptable relationships.

### **Authors’ note**

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### **Supplemental material**

Supplementary material for this article is available online at <http://osf.io/mg39q>.

### **Notes**

1. All analyses were run with and without trans persons included and, unless otherwise noted, the exclusion of trans persons from the data analysis did not change the results of the analyses, and therefore we have opted to present the more inclusive analyses throughout the article.
2. Two-spirit is defined as a “pan-Indigenous term that identifies Indigenous people who do not fit into Western binaries of sex, gender, and/or sexuality” (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. 279)
3. This is an artifact of the sampling process. The study was based in Canada, leading to a more generalized recruitment pattern, while the targeted sampling to recruit LGBTQ participants was more successful beyond Canada’s borders.
4. Some may argue that the most “desirable” response would be the overly inclusive incongruent response, which would involve greater openness across sexual and gender identities of all potential gender expressions when selecting dating partners.

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