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Facebook-mediated social support in the transgender community: a thematic analysis of user experiences

Adam McGuinness

ABSTRACT

The transgender community has unique social support needs due to the myriad of issues surrounding their physical and psychological transition, however identification and discussion of these needs has been neglected in previous literature, which has had an almost exclusively quantitative focus. The present study aimed to explore the ways in which social support was given and received through the medium of Facebook groups, developed by and for transgender users of the social networking site. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven transgender participants and the data were subjected to analysis using the principles of thematic analysis established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis led to the uncovering of three main themes – the types of social support on offer, the features of transgender specific Facebook groups, and the role of interpersonal interaction in the perceptions of social support. Previous definitions of social support are expanded upon, suggesting that minority groups may provide social support to peers in a manner specific to that group's needs. Facebook also provides a unique space in which to provide support in a manner more suited to the needs of the transgender community. Implications and limitations of the findings are discussed.

KEY WORDS	TRANSGENDER	SOCIAL SUPPORT	SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES	FACEBOOK	THEMATIC ANALYSIS
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Introduction

Much of the current literature surrounding transgender individuals focuses on either negative and discriminatory experiences, or on one specific facet of existence, for example the process of 'coming out' to friends and family (Riggle et al., 2011). Whilst it cannot be denied that the narratives generated by these projects have increased our understanding of the experiences that transgender people almost universally encounter and have guided improved interventions in transgender health and wellbeing (Lombardi, 2001), there is a need to explore the more everyday interactions and how they are perceived by the transgender individual engaging in them. To this end, the current study will explore how transgender individuals engage with the popular social networking site Facebook, specifically with other transgender individuals, in order to understand how they perceive the support they receive. Firstly, the concepts of the transgender individual and the issues affecting their existence, social support and Facebook will be discussed and important links identified, before moving on to the qualitative interview study discussed later.

In order to understand the context of the current study, it is first necessary to understand the main issues surrounding those with a transgender identity (referred to interchangeably hereon as 'trans people.')

The term 'transgender' itself is used to describe individuals who identify with gender identities or expressions not associated with the gender they were assigned at birth based on their birth sex (Kenagy, 2005). Those who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth are known as cisgender. Prevalence of trans people within the general population is relatively low – Collin et al. (2016) place the figure at 6.8 per 100,000 population, although the authors note that variations in definition and methodology affect prevalence measures across the literature.

Trans people face a number of issues relating to their existence, both personally and relating to failings of peers and organisations in providing support. Discrimination towards trans-identified individuals occurs, as highlighted in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (Grant et al., 2010), in every area of public and private life. The findings of this survey have been discussed in further research and support has largely been found for the findings. Seelman (2014) expanded on the

findings of the survey indicating that trans people face discrimination when attempting to find housing – 19% of those attempting to access gender-appropriate housing on US college campuses were denied such housing due to being transgender. This is supported by research from the UK, in which Winter et al. (2016) noted systemic discrimination against trans people trying to access housing due to being transgender. Complicating this situation, transgender youth are more likely than their cisgender peers to be forced to leave home, requiring them to rely on housing services from a much younger age.

Discrimination against the transgender population in regard to healthcare is also widely prevalent and acknowledged in both the survey and wider literature. Through interviews with both transgender patients and healthcare providers, Poteat et al. (2013) found transgender healthcare is not included in professional healthcare provider training, meaning professionals are unclear on how to approach and care for trans people. This in turn fosters distrust and rejection of professional healthcare by trans people, who often turn to other, unsafe methods of accessing hormone replacement therapy and other treatments (Bradford et al., 2013). These areas of constant discrimination (including ones not discussed here – see Winter et al. (2016) for a full review) lead to huge personal difficulties – indeed, the rate of suicidal ideation is much higher than the general population, and even above rates in the wider lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) community. Mustanski and Liu (2013) measured levels of suicidal ideation within a sample of the LGB and transgender population and found a lifetime suicide attempt prevalence of 52.4% within the transgender participants, compared to 31.6% in the general LGBT participants. Whilst appearing a frightening figure, it is important to note the small sample size (n=237) and the low proportion of transgender participants (n=21, just 9% of the total participants.) More wide-reaching studies have found lower rates, e.g. a wide sample of trans people (n=515) involved in a study reported a lifetime suicidal ideation rate of 32% (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006). This figure is one widely cited in later literature. Whilst lower than that reported by Mustanski and Liu, this figure is still much higher than that of the general population (a cross-national study put overall prevalence of suicidal ideation or attempts at 9.2% - Nock et al. (2008)) and as such, ways in which to protect transgender individuals warrant much more in-depth consideration.

Whilst a large proportion of research into the transgender population has focused on discrimination and negative outcomes, more recently focus has moved onto the protective factors that can be employed to mediate these negative outcomes and even highlight the positives of transgender identity. Riggle et al. (2011) identified through interviews with transgender individuals that the challenges faced encouraged personal growth and resilience and enhanced interpersonal relationships. The enhancement of interpersonal relationships is especially important given that social support has been identified as a buffer against poor mental health and suicidality. Trujillo et al. (2017) identified that trans people with moderate or high levels of social support dealt much better with experiences of discrimination or poor mental health than those with little or no support. It is then necessary to understand the mechanisms underlying social support and how these affect transgender individuals.

The exact definition of social support is contentious, with researchers suggesting that it should instead be defined within the context it is measured in (Williams et al., 2004.) However, an explanation of the term offered by Kessler et al. (1985) sums up its key facets - "a term...widely used to refer to the mechanisms by which interpersonal relationships presumably protect people from the deleterious effects of stress" (p.11). The benefits of high levels of social support will now be discussed, before exploring the concept in relation to the current study.

Benefits of social support are widely discussed within the literature, noting positive outcomes for both the relationship with the self and that with peers and family (Hermanto et al., 2017). In a study monitoring the relationship between self-reassuring behaviours and social support, Hermanto et al. found that giving and receiving more social support was highly correlated with the ability to self-reassure in stressful situations. This supports the definition of social support given by Kessler et al. (1985), in that social support behaviours can activate systems of buffering against stress.

Social support has been found to be a significant factor in protecting trans people against stress, whether from navigating the complex healthcare system, discrimination, or acting as a protective buffer against mental illness. Budge et al. (2013) assessed transgender participants' responses to a number of measures of

distress and coping mechanisms and found that increased social support from friends and family was a strong and well-deployed coping mechanism against anxiety and depression in the transgender participants. Further research involving the researcher in the 2013 study has also found similar results, this time using qualitative methodology. Budge et al. (2017) identified the processes of accepting support from others and actively seeking out social interaction and support as major themes in the interviews conducted with 15 demographically diverse trans people. However, as with any social support research, it is important to remember that the experiences measured generally rely on measures of self-report, and as such are prone to issues such as social desirability bias and unclear definitions of terms such as 'family' which may change over the lifespan (Hebert et al., 1995; Zimet et al., 1988.)

Just as higher levels of social support can clearly enhance the lives of trans people, research has also shown how a lack of support can lead to negative outcomes. This is especially important within the trans population, as familial rejection is strongly correlated with negative health and wellbeing outcomes (Klein and Golub, 2016.) Factor and Rothblum (2007) explored the differences between social support received by trans individuals and their cisgender siblings. The findings suggested that transgender participants perceived less support from family than their cisgender siblings, making the trans siblings more susceptible to negative reactions to discrimination and violence. However, the level of perceived social support from friends was equal in both trans and cisgender siblings. This finding is important as it suggests more research is needed into the ways through which transgender individuals obtain social support from their peers – a main topic of interest in the current study.

The processes of obtaining social support from peers appear to be similar for both cisgender and transgender individuals. In the LGBT community, peers consistently appear to provide more social support from family members (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002), and similar results are found even in those who are not diverse in sexuality or gender identity – Rodriguez et al. (2003) reported that social support from peers was more relevant to the individual than that for the family, and hence provided stronger buffering against psychological distress. This sample was, however, limited to Latino

students, and the notion of stronger social support from peers is by no means universal (see Licitra-Kleckler and Waas (1993) for a summary of this argument.)

Whilst peer social support is often discussed as it appears in educational and occupational environments, internet-mediated forms of communication (social media or social networking sites (SNS)) also allow the exchange of social support with a wider range of peers. The mechanisms of social support on SNS are as wide ranging and diverse as the user base itself. To briefly summarise some of the findings in this area:

- Active use of Facebook predicts higher levels of perceived social support in teenage girls, reducing incidence of depression (Frison and Eggermont, 2015)
- Accessing online support groups provides increased levels of social support for sufferers of many chronic health conditions, aided by the sense of anonymity and ease of access for disabled users (White and Dorman, 2001)
- Online communication through SNS has a particularly buffering effect against negative life events in those with low self-esteem and those experiencing social isolation (van Ingen and Wright, 2016)

This is by no means an exhaustive view of current social support research, and methods are constantly developing allowing research to expand into new areas. The above summary is merely meant to highlight the importance of online social support in a manner relevant to the topics of the current study.

The current study will specifically explore experiences of perceived social support within a transgender sample on Facebook. Facebook has been chosen as one of the most popular means of online communication (Ross et al., 2009), and also due to the existing literature on online social support concerning trans people and the wider LGBT community (e.g. Cipolletta et al., 2017; Haimson et al., 2015). Facebook as a source of social support will now be considered in more detail, before moving on to summarise the findings discussed in this section and outline the research objectives for the current study.

Facebook is widely acknowledged as the most popular social media site across the world. As of the third quarter of 2017, the website surpassed 1 billion active members, the first social networking site to do so (Statista, 2017). This clearly

indicates that Facebook consists of a very diverse user base, which, according to Stoycheff et al. (2017) enables academic research to be carried out at a number of levels, from exploring interpersonal relationships within minority groups to exploring cross-national variations in communication and general social media use. For the current study, the focus is on how social support has been measured on Facebook, and the small body of literature specifically referring to the transgender community.

Nabi et al. (2013) identified reasons behind the levels of perceived social support among a population of student Facebook users. The number of Facebook friends an individual had (presumably higher than that offline, hence including those that perhaps do not live near the individual) significantly predicted higher levels of perceived social support, with those with more Facebook friends reported reduced stress leading to less physical health problems – both effects of higher social support. This would seem to suggest that the ability to make friends not located in the immediate geographic is an important facet of the social support that Facebook can provide.

The ability to get support from individuals not within sensible geographic distance is especially important to trans people, who may be isolated from other trans individuals due to their location, a phenomenon found worldwide (Morgan et al., 2009; Johnson & Amella, 2014). A recent study by Cipolletta et al. (2017) has particularly highlighted Facebook groups, where individuals from across the globe with a shared interest can converge to socialise, offer support and educate themselves. Cipolletta et al. identified Facebook groups as an understudied mechanism through which trans people access support. Their findings suggested that trans individuals' main motivation for engaging in trans-specific Facebook groups centred around the need for support, by sharing experiences with others who had similar backgrounds, and gaining the chance to test their identity among peers and sympathetic moderators. The study involved collecting information from quantitative measures, and the authors note the need for more detailed understanding of how trans people experience online support.

With this in mind, the rationale for the current study was developed. Whilst previous research has clearly supported the notion that trans people struggle to find social

support, and found that social media (and especially Facebook) can be a consistent source of such support, very little has been done to understand how trans people perceive this support and the effect it has on them (Cipolletta et al. (2017) conducted brief interviews with some of the participants in their study, but the qualitative information gathered did not form part of the analysis.)

The current study will use in-depth interviews with trans people who regularly use trans-specific Facebook groups for support, and analysis will summarise the main themes around the perception of social support and the perceived effect on the individual. As such, the research aims are as follows:

- Understand how trans people use Facebook and for what purposes
- Explore how trans people interact in trans-specific Facebook groups
- Understand in what forms social support appears in trans-specific Facebook groups

By exploring the motivations of trans people to engage in Facebook groups, and identifying the key benefits, the current study will add rich detail to current theories of online social support in a specifically trans population, which have largely been developed through quantitative methods. The in-depth interviews will allow for understanding of how transgender individuals give and receive social support in a specific online arena, which may also inform those researching how other minority groups use SNS to make connections.

The research question is: How do interactions in trans-specific Facebook groups affect trans people's perceptions of social support?

Method

Design

The study involved the use of qualitative interview data collected by the researcher through single interviews conducted with participants. This choice was different to those made in previous literature (e.g. Cipolletta et al., 2017) which focused on analysis of pre-existing content in the public domain. It was hoped that this would allow for increased access to the personal experiences and thoughts of the target population.

Participants

Seven participants were recruited to take part in the interview process. This number of participants was decided based on previous literature in the area, suggesting between six and ten participants for such a design (Daley et al., 2007; Kidd et al., 2011). Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to recruit participants with the characteristics needed for the study. A brief description of each participant is included below. Each participant agreed to be identified by their initials.

SG, a non-binary individual originally from America, now living in Edinburgh, UK. *SG* is heavily involved in Facebook groups, and uses the platform to communicate with their girlfriend, also transgender.

PG, a non-binary individual from the south-west of England. They are involved in transgender and spiritual Facebook groups, running and helping to run a large number of groups.

LTW, a university student from the south of England. He uses Facebook to communicate with friends and family whilst at university, but also seeks support regularly from a group for transgender men.

HT, a transgender woman from the north of England. Facebook is her main means of communicating with others, and she has used transgender support groups throughout her transition.

EJ, a non-binary individual from the north-east of England. They are involved in Facebook groups spanning a wide range of interests and concerns, including transgender support groups where they regularly give and offer support.

EA, a transgender woman originally from South Africa, now living in Wales. She uses Facebook to communicate with friends across the world and regularly interacts with transgender interest groups with a wide range of topics.

DE, a university student from the north-east of England. He uses Facebook to communicate with friends across the country and close friends regularly, and is active in Facebook groups for transgender men.

Participants were recruited through advertisements distributed to local transgender groups. The advert encouraged those interested in the study to contact the

researcher for more information. To qualify for the study, potential participants had to be over 18 years of age, identify as transgender and have an active Facebook account.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee at Manchester Metropolitan University. Participants were reminded of their rights in regard to the study, including the right to withdraw data and confidentiality processes both before and after participation. The use of social media (specifically Facebook) to collect data was in line with British Psychological Society (BPS) guidelines, including the confidential storage of information and robust implementation of consent and debrief procedures (BPS, 2013). Risks were considered in the context of the possibility to cause mental distress to participants, and all participants were given the details of several organisations available to help with any adverse effects of taking part in the study.

Research process

The choice to conduct the interviews using Facebook Messenger was taken following consultation of literature in the area. Using the principles of focused ethnography discussed by Knoblauch (2005, cited in Pink and Morgan, 2013), which are more suited to the analytic process of the current study, the interview environment was constructed. Focused ethnography involves short-term intensive data collection within an environment pertaining to the phenomenon being studied, producing transcripts which are rich in data and highly conducive to the thematic coding process. Therefore, 30 to 45-minute interviews were conducted with each participant, using a semi-structured interview process allowing the researcher to focus on specific points of interest brought up by the participant when necessary.

A social constructivist approach was taken to analysing the data. This takes into account the processes through which individuals construct their own realities through individual perception of events, and acknowledges that societal structures are generated through the interaction of such individuals (Houston, 2001). This view is important in the context of the current study, as it is widely acknowledged

that a transgender identity challenges existing societal structures of gender (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014), and as such it is important to consider the alternative construction of phenomena, such as social support, within the transgender and gender-diverse community.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the method to analyse the data collected. As defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a foundational approach in qualitative data analysis with applications across epistemological perspectives.

The procedure of thematic analysis depends upon the analytical stance taken. For the purposes of the current study, a hybrid inductive-deductive approach, similar to that described in Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) was selected. The selection of this approach was due to the flexibility to identify both organic themes forming within the data, and to identify those codes expected through pre-existing theories in the area of interest. As such, the analytic procedure, guided by that laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006), was as follows:

- Transcription: transcription of the data was not necessary due to the method of collection – the data was already in text form.
- Initial coding: potential codes of interest for analysis were collected through systematic reading of all interviews in the data set. Codes repeated within the data set were condensed and their significance to the analysis noted.
- Collation of codes into themes: groups of codes and their raw data counterparts were used to construct themes relevant to the current topic. ○
- Defining themes: involved the collation of themes to produce a thorough account of the social support, identifying both the meaning of the theme and how it was expressed throughout the data set, ready for analysis.

The research process was influenced heavily by established quality criteria. Many qualitative researchers agree that quality criteria ensure rigour during the process of such research, enabling the research to be quality-tested on a level similar to that of qualitative research (Mays and Pope, 2000). The application of quality criteria is seen most heavily at the coding stage of thematic analysis – specifically the use of a coding method that utilises codes drawn from existing theories and literature and those generated through careful reading of the data, comprising a systematic procedure (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Also of

importance is a reflexive process (Tobin & Begley, 2004) - including the effects of personal biases on the part of the researcher, and prior experiences shaping the research. Awareness and discussion of these influences mean that, whilst it is impossible to remove personal bias from the work, the credibility of the research is enhanced (Mays & Pope, 2000).

Analysis

Upon completion of thematic analysis, three major themes were uncovered – the types of support on offer to users of transgender-exclusive Facebook groups, the features of these groups, and the role of interpersonal interaction. The data within each of these themes provide insights into how transgender individuals perceive the giving and receiving of social support within an online arena. Each theme will be discussed in more detail below.

Types of support on offer

Four subthemes were identified by participants – financial support, practical support, advice and validation. These bear similarity to the model of social support proposed by Jacobson (1986), who proposed that social support offers emotional, cognitive and material support to those experiencing stress and the issues associated with generally low social support – something experienced by many trans people who lack support from family and offline associates (Factor and Rothblum, 2007). Each subtheme will be discussed below in terms of its expanding of understanding of the role of social support in trans people's lives.

Financial support

Contrary to other models of social support, participants were aware of the financial needs of both themselves and others in the community and actively sought to alleviate financial distress. One participant found themselves in need of financial support, and described their experience:

I had seen other GoFundMe links posted before, so I decided I had to try...5 or 6 people from that group each gave £5-£20. Then an anonymous donor (who is from that group because I searched their name), gave me the rest of the money (£400) I

needed...they said they've been in the same situation (about to be homeless, and homophobic family would not be an option). [SG, line 41-46]

Here, SG illustrates the willingness of the transgender community on Facebook to provide tangible support to another member of the community. Whilst little discussion of financial support as a form of social support exists in the literature, there appears to be a link between the two. Cohen and McKay (1984) suggest that whilst the donation of money may seem a non-psychological process, it is the psychological interpretation of the act by both the giver and receiver that decides the classification of social support. In the transgender community, individuals are aware of the financial hardships faced by those seeking accommodation, healthcare costs, and those in food poverty. These hardships are widely experienced by members of the community, and so those with the resources to provide financial support often do, due to personal or close friend experiences of similar factors. Those on the receiving end often reach out for support themselves, rather than just being awarded 'handouts', so retain their sense of autonomy and hence take a positive view of donations rather than seeing it as a character weakness on their part.

Practical support

Participants noted that practical support was widely on offer within the groups. This included the offer of accommodation when travelling, especially to places or events important to the transgender community:

I met quite a few people I knew in groups during Brighton trans pride, that's the reason I was able to go, because those people let me stay with them and made it accessible too! [EJ, line 62-64]

Previous literature has explored the notion of practical social support almost exclusively in respect to health psychology and particularly treatment adherence (Scheurer et al., 2012; DiMatteo, 2004). It is clear to see from the way in which participants described their experiences that practical social support extends beyond the areas already identified. The support experienced and discussed by the participants meets the needs of transgender individuals already identified in the literature – issues with safe and consistent accommodation are regularly noted as a

large issue to the transgender population, and especially younger transgender individuals (Winter et al., 2016).

Advice

Discussions of the advice exchanged within the Facebook groups largely centred on medical issues – both those directly related to the transgender identity and more widely to the intersection of transgender identity with other health issues both mental and physical.

I've just wanted to make that information more available to other people, so I can give people advice on things I've been through...I give and receive advice about things...specific to both groups, for example helping people with breathing issues/rib issues know how to safely bind, or helping people whose therapist thinks their BPD [Borderline Personality Disorder] is to blame for their gender identity [EJ, line 37-41]

For me it's been mostly emotional and mental support, although I have seen other people asking about [medical] transition stuff and learnt a lot from that [EA, line 9192]

It is well established that transgender individuals often look to online arenas to ask questions regarding their medical transition (Cipolletta et al., 2017), and in line with this, participants explained how it is difficult to access such information offline due to the specificity of their situation. Participants widely discussed seeking help for issues intersecting with their transgender identity, something not yet identified in literature on the topic. However, the existence and use of Facebook groups for support with medical and mental health issues is widely studied (e.g. Bender et al., 2011), and it is therefore unsurprising that the transgender community attempt to gain support with these issues from within their own community, where they are less likely to face discrimination based on their transgender identity.

Validation

Participants spoke at length about the validation they experienced within the Facebook groups:

I feel like it's a normal thing, and that you're not alone, everyone is experiencing a similar thing and it's easier to deal with things. [DE, line 65-66]

...seeing other people expressing feelings or describing experiences I have had myself that help me to feel assured that the things I feel and think regarding my identity are valid... [EA, line 103-105].

All participants shared the same views regarding validation. It is well-documented in the literature that transgender people are often ridiculed for their identity, or indeed told that it does not exist, or is not possible, leading to a sense of distress in the individual (Sevelius, 2013). The provision of validation of one's gender identity by peers is a highly important aspect of social support, and has repeatedly been found to be extremely important to the emotional wellbeing of transgender individuals (Melendez and Pinto, 2007). These findings were reflected by the participants in the current study, as seen above. This is further evidence suggesting that social support is context-dependent, and the mechanisms underlying what group members see as social support differ depending on the experiences and needs of the group, as identified by Barrera (1983).

Features of transgender-exclusive Facebook groups

Little of the previous research into use of social networking sites by transgender individuals has focused on the features of the online spaces they inhabit, and so participants were encouraged to discuss this during the interviews. Subthemes included the purpose of the groups participants were involved in and the development and maintenance of the groups. These subthemes provided varying insights into the social support processes experienced by the participants within the context of Facebook groups.

Purpose of the group

The groups were noted as varying in purpose, although a large percentage were focused on providing some form of social support as discussed above. One participant provided a summary of the genres of transgender-exclusive groups available on Facebook:

...there are some that are specifically for support, like a place to get validation and sympathy when things are difficult for you, others are...for talking about gender on a philosophical level...then there are...just general hang out spaces, and still more that are just for memes and using humour to cope. [EA, line 31-35]

Other participants echoed these comments, and whilst support groups were both most commonly discussed and indeed are central to the purposes of this research, it is important to acknowledge that other groups are present and indeed may have their own specific contributions to the way in which social support needs are met online. The role of humour has been noted as having a positive effect on perceptions of social support in patients with schizophrenia (Gelkopf et al., 1994) and in teachers experiencing professional and personal isolation (Mawhinney, 2008). It appears that humour may act as a buffer against negative experiences, both internal and external, and contribute to the ability to give and receive support (Yip and Martin, 2006).

Development and maintenance of groups

Unlike many other Facebook groups, which are often set up by an individual with a plan to bring together a group of individuals (e.g. a sports team or educational cohort – Pi et al., 2013), the transgender-exclusive groups discussed largely developed organically. One participant acted as an administrator to several trans-specific Facebook groups as well as engaging in them as a member, and described their experience of creating the groups:

A few of the groups I'm in or admin have literally started out as a small thread in a larger group, someone saying "is there anyone else here like me?" and then that blossoming into a whole new group. [PG, line 78-90].

The autonomy granted to Facebook users to create their own communities allows for the spontaneous and organic development of groups as discussed by PG above. Cooperation between group members and administrators allows for the online space to be shaped in such a manner that it can meet the specific support needs of the community in question. This is especially important in the context of the transgender community, who, as already identified, have specific support needs that are rarely met in the wider, largely non-transgender world (Grossman and D'Augelli, 2006).

The role of interpersonal interaction

One of the most salient aspects of this theme, the development of friendships mediated by the online space, was mentioned by almost all participants:

I think it's a really good idea for these trans groups as they're easily accessible and making friends is good, I've met people meet up at pride and I've got a couple of friends that I talk with online but not as close as other friends [DE, line 39-41]

Here, DE highlights a theme of accessibility also mentioned by other participants. There are several factors implicated in the online space appearing to be more accessible and facilitating of friendship than offline spaces to its users. One is that online communication appears to facilitate self-disclosure, which Tian (2011) suggests is essential to the development of friendships. This is particularly visible in the transgender community – disclosure of a transgender identity can pose a risk to physical safety in the offline sphere (Lombardi et al., 2002), and hence trans individuals may feel safer disclosing their identity in a non-physical arena. This self-disclosure is essential to the development of an authentic friendship, and indeed identifying oneself as transgender will allow access to the specific social support needs and processes of the transgender community.

The notion of shared experience is also important when considering both friendship development and social support in the online context. Especially within the transgender community, where personal narratives are rarely discussed in the wider media, being able to draw comfort from the knowledge of others' shared understanding was highlighted by participants. Shared experience, communicated through mutual support groups, has previously been identified as having a largely positive effect on both physical and mental health, and encourages the seeking of company and development of friendships (Davison et al., 2000). Such findings have largely been discussed in the context of chronic illness, so similar findings in the transgender population suggest that shared experience is important in social support and friendship development in many minority groups.

At odds with the otherwise positive discussion of group interactions, conflict was noted as occurring within the groups. This conflict was described by participants as occurring usually due to in-group discrimination towards another minority group:

...all the identity and gender policing, and binarism [the assumption of the existence of only two genders] [PG, line 33-34]

I got kicked out of [a group] because I didn't TW [providing a trigger warning, alerting people to the content of a post] functioning labels when I talked about my [autism] diagnosis [HT, line 15-16]

The processes underlying the forms of interaction experienced in the Facebook groups bear similarity to the model of group development proposed by Tuckman (1965). According to Tuckman, intragroup conflict is a key developmental stage in the process towards developing a cohesive group. Tuckman's model of group development, including the need for testing, conflict, cohesion and a functional role have not been applied to online groups or minority groups in the literature to date, but the interactions that participants in the current study have described would appear to suggest that this model also applies in respect to transgender-specific Facebook groups.

Discussion

Regarding the research question, it was found that trans-specific Facebook groups clearly influence the transgender individual's perception of social support. Individuals actively seek out and engage in these online spaces to gain support and advice from those sharing the uncommon experience of being transgender, something that is much more difficult in offline spaces. The forms of social support discussed by participants showed a need to reconsider how social support is viewed as a concept – there appears to be a fluidity in which social support can change to meet the needs of the population it is occurring within, especially within minority populations. This notion should be further considered to establish the role and forms of social support in other groups.

The methods employed within the research are not without their limitations. Number of participants was limited due to restraints on time and resources, and so could be increased with consideration to data saturation, the point at which no new themes can be found (e.g. Guest et al., 2006). The choice to employ thematic analysis as the form of data analysis can also limit findings and has been criticised by other qualitative researchers. One such issue is the lack of delineation between thematic

analysis and other qualitative measures – some researchers argue that thematic analysis can often cross over into phenomenological analysis or content analysis methods (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Thematic analysis also requires the data to be broken down and sorted according to codes, which may cause the data to lose some of its meaning compared to approaches such as narrative analysis, where all data is considered sequentially and in terms of its consequences (Riessman, 2005). However, thematic analysis remains a comprehensive process for identifying key themes and for the interpretation of these themes in order to expand knowledge surrounding a phenomenon (Alhojailan, 2012).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the process of critical self-evaluation and acknowledgement of the position of the researcher, and the effects of this on the collection and analysis of data, the methods employed during research, and the effect of the researcher as an individual in terms of participant interaction (Berger, 2015). Acknowledgement of researcher bias and positioning is integral in the production of rigorous research (Pillow, 2003), and hence the experiences and views of myself as the researcher will be discussed below.

As a transgender man myself, I had easier access to the transgender community than most, due to my previous experiences of socialising within these circles. I believe that this allowed the participants to feel more comfortable and able to discuss parts of their transgender identity without fear of misunderstanding or judgement which may occur from someone with little knowledge of the experience of being transgender. My own history also meant that I approached the interviews with my own preconceived ideas surrounding the social support available to transgender individuals. I was aware of Facebook-mediated support for transgender individuals but had very little experience of using them myself. This allowed me to be able to identify the questions that needed to be asked to gain information about the groups, but not influence the participants in terms of the valence of answers given.

I chose to take a social constructionist view during analysis due to my previous experience of this epistemological standing and as a way of understanding how transgender individuals construct their ideas of identity and social support. Whilst

other perspectives (e.g. critical realism) may have brought different interpretations of the data, I believe that social constructionism was the best way in which to understand the differing experiences of transgender individuals in this context.

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