Emerging Adults’ Psychosocial Adjustment: Does a Best Friend’s Gender Matter?

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ABSTRACT. Friendship quality has been associated with psychosocial adjustment throughout the lifespan. Although emerging adults’ friendships differ by gender, little is known about how the gender of emerging adults and their friends are related to their psychosocial adjustment. Undergraduate students from 4 U.S. universities (N = 792) completed an online study. Women reported higher levels of self-worth, identity commitment, social physique anxiety, and friendship quality than did men, $F(5, 779) = 10.12$, $p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$. A gender x friend’s gender interaction was found, $F(5, 779) = 3.22, p = .007, \eta^2 = .02$, such that women with male friends reported lower levels of self-worth and more social physique anxiety compared to those with female friends, and men with female friends reported lower levels of self-worth compared to those with male friends. Thus, gender differences existed in emerging adults’ psychosocial adjustment, but the gender of friends also aided in explaining that adjustment.

Friendships are advantageous to psychosocial development throughout the lifespan, but may become increasingly important during the third decade of life as individuals turn to friends instead of parents for support, advice, and companionship (Fehr, 2000). Indeed, due to demographic shifts that have delayed marital and parenthood timing and increased the pursuit of higher education, Arnett (2011) contended that the years from 18 to 29 are characterized by identity explorations, instability (e.g., changing roommates, love partners, jobs, educational directions), self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and possibilities. As emerging adults experiment with romantic partners, they simultaneously forge close friendships in support of what Erikson (1968) called the young adulthood psychosocial crisis of emotional intimacy versus isolation. Because the majority of best friendships are with members of the same gender¹ (Demir & Özdemir, 2010), much of this research on friendships has focused on these relationships and their contribution to psychosocial adjustment; consequently, less is known about the association of other-gender friendships with well-being (c.f., Monsour, 2002). Other-gender friendships provide opportunities for intimacy, companionship, perspective into the world of the other gender, and sexual exploration (among heterosexuals). Significant gender differences exist in emerging adults’ same-gender friendships, such that women tend to focus more on the intimacy aspects of friendships, although men focus mainly on agency (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006). Thus, other-gender friendships might impact adjustment differentially for men and women. In this study, we examined emerging adults’ gender and the role of their friends’ gender on psychosocial adjustment (i.e., self-worth, identity, friendship quality, and social physique anxiety).

¹In accordance with APA 6th Edition Publication Manual, we have chosen to use the terms gender, same-gender, and opposite-gender throughout the manuscript. We believe that changes in psychosocial adjustment are not solely due to one’s physiological makeup as connoted by the term sex, but rather that such differences emerge from gender role socialization as well.
Friendship

Friendships are salient relationships for emerging adults as they experience increased autonomy from parents, but may not yet have formed families of their own. Friendships are critical for satisfying emerging adults’ social needs, and a substantial amount of time is spent with friends (Fehr, 2000). These friendships are significant because the intimacy, companionship, and social support that they provide are advantageous both in the short and long term. For instance, Grover, Nangle, Serwick, and Zeff (2007) demonstrated that discussions with friends influence academic achievement as well as career aspirations. They also found that friends encourage each other to refine interests and opinions, and to participate in new activities, all of which promotes emerging adults’ identity exploration. Furthermore, friendships build the skills necessary for developing serious romantic relationships later in life (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009).

As summarized by Hartup and Stevens (1997), friendship quality has been assessed with respect to companionship, intimacy, commitment, affective tone, instrumental help, and conflict. Moreover, these scholars note that positive friendship quality relates to higher levels of self-esteem and fewer identity problems. In a seminal study of emerging adults in various life phases, Carbery and Buhrmester (1998) found that friendships of unmarried emerging adults tend to be of high quality because friends are the main confidants regarding personal issues (e.g., values and romantic relationships), and provide a central role in companionship; upon marriage, the spouse takes on these roles. As a result, in the current study, we wanted to understand how gender contributes to emerging adults’ friendship quality as an indicator of their social adjustment.

Gender Differences

Significant gender differences have been found in the way that women and men interact with friends and view friendships. According to Baumgarte and Nelson (2009), when close friends experience negative events or celebratory events, women are found to be more responsive than men regardless of whether they reported having a same- or other-gender friend. Further, both men and women report preferring male friends for engaging in activities, but female friends for emotional intimacy. This high level of intimacy may be a result of women’s greater social orientation and sensitivity, which aids in decoding emotions (Ruble et al., 2006).

Other-Gender and Same-Gender Friendships

Friendships vary based upon gender, but they also vary with respect to the gender of the friend. Most adults in the U.S. favor same-gender friendships over other-gender friendships (Rose, 1985) due in part to the cultural challenges of having authentic friendships with the other gender (Rawlins, 1982); however, other-gender friendships are fairly common among emerging adults, especially at universities (Monsour, 2002). According to Felmlee (1999), women’s same-gender friendships are more intimate and playful than are their other-gender friendships and men find their same-gender friendships to be less demanding than their other-gender friendships. Perhaps this is because other-gender friendships can provoke greater anxiety among heterosexuals, as friends may be viewed as potential romantic or sexual partners (Grover, 2011). Nevertheless, clear advantages to other-gender friendships exist in that they tend to allow for insider perspectives, other-gender companionship, and sensitization to gender differences in communication styles (Monsour, 2002). As a result, such relationships may be critical to long-term adjustment by allowing emerging adults to learn and practice skills that will help them in their subsequent romantic relationships. Other-gender friendships also provide opportunities to determine if one is viewed as attractive in the eyes of the other gender (Monsour, 2002) and to explore and become romantically involved with others. In a study by Afifi and Faulkner (2000), half of heterosexual college students had had sex with an other-gender friend, with some of these relationships becoming romantic partnerships.

Although previous research has considered other-gender friendships in comparison to romantic relationships, and in some cases same-gender friendships, in the current study we examined how emerging adults’ psychological (namely self-esteem, identity exploration and commitment, and social physique anxiety) and social adjustment (friendship quality) are related to whether such individuals report their best friend to be of the same or other gender.

Self-Development

As one indicator of psychological adjustment, self-esteem is defined as the sum of evaluations across salient attributes of one’s self or personality; it is the overall affective evaluation of one’s own worth, value, or importance (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991). During the third decade, emerging
adults’ self becomes increasingly differentiated (Ruble et al., 2006). Self-esteem varies across individuals, yet age trends also exist. Specifically, a steady increase of self-esteem occurs from adolescence to middle adulthood, when thereafter it declines (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012). Reports of gender differences have been mixed, with some studies reporting emerging-adult women as having lower levels of self-esteem (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006), and other studies reporting higher levels of self-esteem (Grover et al., 2007) compared to emerging-adult men. Given that self-esteem has been shown to decrease when individuals face multiple transitions (e.g., early adolescent girls who experience simultaneous pubertal and school transitions; Simmons & Blyth, 1987), it is important to study self-esteem in emerging adulthood, a time of instability in social networks (Arnett, 2011).

The identity of one’s friend has been related to how an individual feels about oneself. Specifically, friendship-contingent self-esteem is conceptualized as feelings about the self that are dependent on how well relationships with friends are going (Cambron, Acitelli, & Steinberg, 2010), and individuals who rely heavily on others’ input have a greater fluctuation of self-esteem (Ruble et al., 2006). In the current study, therefore, we examined the extent to which emerging adults’ gender and that of their friends are related to the emerging adults’ self-esteem.

Identity
Marcia (1980) defined identity as a self-constructed dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and personal history in a coherent and autonomous self. Identity is not only a representation of who people think they are, but also the way in which they think (Lewis, 2003). Identity formation is critical during the second and third decade of life (Erikson, 1968), and identity tends to fluctuate during the formation process. Some gender differences have been found in identity formation. As summarized by Archer (1989), men are more likely to be committed to a goal or a belief, whereas women are more likely to question alternative roles. Further, few gender differences exist in process, domain or timing of identity formation. Nevertheless, towards the end of emerging adulthood, individuals’ identity becomes more stable after they have tried out many possible roles (Côté, 2006).

Variation in developing identity formation may be due to gender as well as friendship experiences. As stated previously, women experience more intimate relationships than do men, especially in their same-gender friendships (Roy, Benenson, & Lilly, 2000). Because friends aid in the development of identity, and friendships differ as a result of gender, these factors may contribute to why men and women experience identity formation and commitment differently. Furthermore, a friend’s gender also may be related to the identity process, given the different advantages and disadvantages of same-versus other-gender friendships. In the current study, we examined emerging adults’ gender and the role of their friends’ gender in relation to identity exploration and commitment.

Social Physique Anxiety
Social physique anxiety refers to the anxiety that people experience when they are worried about others’ evaluations of their bodies (Brunet, Sabiston, Dorsch, & McCrery, 2010). In general, social physique anxiety occurs when individuals anticipate that others might evaluate their physical appearance negatively. According to Davison and McCabe (2006), social physique anxiety has been linked to numerous psychosocial issues in emerging adults, especially eating disorders, which in turn are linked to an increased risk for physical and mental health problems during adulthood. Further, they note that body image is one of the main stressors for emerging adults due to physical developments associated with increased social comparisons and the increased importance of social conformity. Additionally, they find that individuals who report lower levels of self-esteem generally report higher levels of social physique anxiety than do individuals reporting higher levels of self-esteem.

As there are gender disparities concerning the prevalence of eating disorders (Brunet et al., 2010) and self-esteem (Harter, 2012), it is perhaps not surprising that there are gender differences in social physique anxiety as well. In this decade alone, the media has had a substantial impact on individuals’ ideals of appearance, with men experiencing a drive for muscularity and women experiencing a drive for thinness (Hutchinson, Rapee, & Taylor, 2010).

In a life phase filled with romantic partner exploration and self-exploration, it is perhaps not surprising that social physique anxiety is higher among emerging adults than adolescents (Woelders, Larsen, Scholte, Cillessen, & Engels, 2010). As individuals begin to explore romantic relationships, they are very aware of how others evaluate their bodies, thus resulting in higher
levels of social physique anxiety. Given the higher rates of social physique anxiety in this life stage compared to younger ages (Woelders et al., 2010) and the distinct experiences of same-versus other-gender friendships (see Barry & Madsen, 2010), we examined the extent to which emerging adults’ gender and their friends’ gender were related to social physique anxiety.

The Current Study
It is widely known that friendships are beneficial to the psychosocial development of emerging adults (Fehr, 2000). However, most studies that document this relationship between friends and adjustment confound having a friend and friendship quality (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Consequently, we sought to examine who the friend was (with respect to the friend’s gender) from the experience of that friendship (i.e., friendship quality). Furthermore, there has been little research examining whether the gender of that friendship matters to psychosocial adjustment. As a result, in the current study we examined the extent to which emerging adults’ gender and their friends’ gender were related to the emerging adults’ psychosocial adjustment, including self-worth, identity (both exploration and commitment), social physique anxiety, and friendship quality.

Method
Participants
Participants were drawn from the 2009–2010 data collection of “[Project READY (Researching Emerging Adults Developmental Years)],” a multi-site study that was conducted by several developmental and family scholars. Participants for the current study consisted of 790 undergraduate students: 547 women (69%), 243 men (31%), M age = 19.61, SD = 1.86, 18–29 age range. Participants were recruited at four different universities, including 14% (n = 112) from Loyola University Maryland, 19% (n = 151) from Louisiana State University, 30% (n = 240) from Kansas State University, and 37% (n = 289) from University of California-Davis. There was an overall response rate of approximately 60% at each site (range: 50–71%). Institutional Review Boards at each institution reviewed and approved this research.

Many participants (40%) were in their first year of university education, but other class years were represented: 27% second year, 20% third year, and 9% fourth year. Only 10% of the participants reported living in their parents’ home; the remainder of the sample lived either in an apartment, house, or dormitory separate from their parents. Racially, most of the participants were European American (69% European American, 18% Asian American, 5% Latino American, 5% mixed/biracial, and 3% African American). Also, the sample was 95% heterosexual. A quarter of these participants had parents with a combined annual income of over $100,000, and 23% had parents with combined annual income of less than $50,000. Sixty percent of participants’ fathers and 55% of mothers had earned a bachelor’s degree or more.

Measures
Self-worth. Participants completed the self-worth subscale of the Self Perceptions Profile for College Students (Neeman & Harter, 1986). In the original subscale, participants chose between two opposing statements as to which statement was most like them and then to what extent. For the current study, based upon inspection of factor loadings onto the overall score of global self-worth, only five items were used. Each of the five items were reworded from two opposing statements into one single statement, such as “I am happy being the way I am.” Items were rated on a scale from 1 to 4, where 4 represented the most competent or adequate self-judgment and 1 represented the least competent or adequate self-judgment (in the current study, α = .84). Concerning validity, Nelson et al. (2008) showed that emerging adults who reported higher levels of self-worth were less likely to report shyness.

Identity. Participants completed the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel, & Geisinger, 1995) to assess identity exploration and commitment. The original measure consisted of 32 items, but only the exploration subscale (four items) and commitment subscale (eight items) were used in this study. Participants answered questions on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). Scoring was reversed for negatively stated items. Items scored were summed to obtain total scores for each subscale separately. Sample items included, “I have tried to learn about different occupational fields to find the best one for me” (in the current study, exploration, α = .65), and “I am not sure about what type of dating relationship is best for me” (in the current study, commitment, α = .72). Emerging adults who were shy (low on extraversion and anxiety) were more likely to report low levels of identity commitment.
than were asocial (low on extraversion, but high on anxiety) or comparison group participants (average extraversion and anxiety levels; Barry, Nelson, & Christofferson, 2013).

**Friendship quality.** Emerging adults were asked to assess their best friendship on the four subscales (intimate disclosure, affection, emotional support, and guidance/advice) of the Social Provisions Questionnaire (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998). Participants answered 12 questions about their best friend on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = little or none to 5 = the most). To distinguish between a friend and other close relationships, the following instructions were given: “The next questions ask about your relationships with each of the following people (1) your best friend (nonromantic), (2) your romantic partner, and (3) your mother and father. Please answer each of the following questions for each person. Sometimes the answers for different people may be the same; sometimes they may be different.” Sample items include “How much do you tell this person everything?” for intimate disclosure, “How much does this person like or love you?” for affection, “How good is your relationship with this person?” for emotional support, and “How often do you turn to this person for support with personal problems?” for guidance/advice. Items were averaged to yield the total score for friendship quality (for the current study, $\alpha = .96$). As Nelson et al. (2008) showed, greater levels of friendship quality (using an average of all 9 subscales) were associated with lower levels of shyness. Also, shy emerging adults (i.e., low levels of extraversion, but high levels of anxiety) reported lower levels of affection (a subscale of friendship quality) than did the comparison group (i.e., average levels of extraversion and anxiety; Barry et al., 2013).

**Gender of best friend.** After completing the friendship quality inventory, participants were asked the following question, “What is the gender of the best friend you had in mind when answering these questions?” Responses were coded as 0 for men and 1 for women.

**Social physique anxiety.** Given the large battery of scales that were used in this larger data collection, the Project READY investigators choose three of the original 12 items from the Social Physique Anxiety Scale (Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989) that had the strongest factor loadings for the scale to be included in this study. Then participants rated these three items on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Sample questions included “When I look in the mirror I feel good about my physique or figure” and “In the presence of others, I feel apprehensive about my physique or figure.” In the current study, the alpha level was .82, which is comparable to those that used the full scale ($\alpha = .87$; Brunet et al., 2010). Concerning validity, Brunet et al. (2010) found self-esteem to be related negatively to social physique anxiety, which in turn was related positively to drive for muscularity and drive for thinness.

**Procedure**

Faculty announcements in undergraduate courses notified participants of the study. In order to appeal to a broad range of students, undergraduate courses were primarily introductory psychology courses or other large general education courses. Faculty members distributed a handout to their students that included a brief explanation of the study and instructions for accessing the online survey. Students used a class-specific recruitment code to access the study website. After informed consent was obtained online, the participants began the questionnaires, which took approximately 45 min to complete. Online data collection allowed for a unified compilation across multiple universities. A $20 Amazon gift code was distributed to most participants for their participation, but a few students were offered extra credit for their participation.

**Results**

To test the hypothesis that emerging adults’ gender as well as friends’ gender are related to psychosocial adjustment, a 2 (gender) x 2 (friend’s gender) MANOVA was calculated on self-worth, identity exploration, identity commitment, friendship quality, and social physique anxiety\(^2\). As shown in Table 1, main effects were found for gender, $F(5, 779) = 10.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$, but not for friend’s gender, $F(5, 779) = .59, ns$. Specifically, women reported higher levels of self-worth, identity commitment, and friendship quality as well as higher levels of social physique anxiety than did men. The MANOVA also revealed a gender x friend’s gender interaction, $F(5, 779) = 3.22, p = .007$.

\(^2\)To eliminate any potential confound of friendship quality on these analyses, we separately conducted a 2 (gender) x 2 (friend’s gender) MANCOVA on self-esteem, identity exploration, identity commitment, and social physique anxiety, while controlling for friendship quality. The results were exactly the same as reported in the manuscript with one difference; the main effect of gender on self-worth became a trend ($p = .09$). Because multivariate analyses always involve interpreting data based upon the highest level of significant interaction, and self-worth was involved in an interaction, we presented the original analyses.
Specifically, two significant gender x friend’s gender interactions were found on self-worth and social physique anxiety; univariate ANOVAs were calculated to explore these interactions as shown in Table 2. For self-worth, having same-gender friends was associated with higher levels of self-worth, $F(1, 779) = 9.93$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .007$. For social physique anxiety, women reported greater levels when their friend was a man compared to when their friend was a woman, $F(1, 779) = 6.16$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .009$. No differences in social physique anxiety were found for men based upon their friends’ gender.

**Discussion**

Our research investigated the emerging adults’ gender and the role their best friends play in emerging adults’ psychosocial adjustment. In our study, women reported higher levels of self-worth, identity commitment, friendship quality, and social physique anxiety overall than did men. Having same-gender friends was associated with higher levels of self-worth, especially for men. Women reported substantially more social physique anxiety when their friend was a man compared to when their friend was a woman. In sum, gender differences existed in emerging adults’ psychosocial adjustment, but the gender composition of the friendship aided in explaining that adjustment.

**Gender and Psychosocial Adjustment**

**Friendship quality.** Our findings regarding friendship quality (which consisted of intimate disclosure, affection, emotional support, and guidance/advice) were consistent with the existing literature with greater emotional intimacy in women’s friendships (e.g., Ruble et al., 2006) and greater emphasis on shared activities and companionship in men’s friendships (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009). Therefore, given these friendship patterns, it is not surprising that women report higher levels of friendship quality in emerging adulthood, as well as throughout the lifespan.

**Social physique anxiety.** Women’s reports of higher levels of social physique anxiety also were consistent with earlier research that documented heightened societal pressures for women to be thin (Brunet et al., 2010). After puberty, the ideal of an unrealistically thin body becomes increasingly harder for girls (and, later, women) to achieve due to the normative increase in body fat (Smoll & Schutz, 1990). Boys (and men) have an easier time during and after puberty acquiring muscles than do girls (and women; Brunet et al., 2010). Therefore, our findings fit with the literature because the physical reality of the muscle to fat ratio has the potential to result in higher levels of social physique anxiety in these emerging-adult women compared to emerging-adult men.

**Self-esteem.** Although the current study found that women reported higher levels of self-esteem, the literature was mixed with some finding lower levels (Orth, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2010) and others finding higher levels (Grover et al., 2007) for women. Further, these gender differences tended to diminish only after the age of 30 (Orth et al., 2010). The sociohistorical context could explain, in part, this mixed literature. Several decades ago, women suffered from self-doubt, feelings of incompetence, and loneliness if they were unmarried and did not have a career by the age of thirty (Helson, 1992; Helson, Mitchell, & Moane, 1984). At present, women receive the majority of all bachelor’s degrees in the United States (Grabmeier, 2006), and in turn are climbing the corporate and professional ladder to a greater extent than ever before (Bertrand & Hallock, 2001). Since adolescents in college bound tracks make the strongest gains in self-esteem over high school (Fuligni, Eccles, & Barber, 1995), it is plausible that these university sample of women used for the current study are likely to report higher levels of self-esteem than the population at large of emerging-adult women.

**Identity.** In our study, women reported higher levels of identity commitment, even though the existing literature was mixed with women reporting greater difficulty in forming an identity (Gilligan, 1982) or finding few gender differences in process.

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$p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$
domain, and timing of identity development (Archer, 1989). We suspect that this finding reflects some historical changes as was just described for gender differences in self-esteem (Grabmeier, 2006). Thus, such women have utilized this structured moratorium effectively and developed a clear plan for who they are and where they are next headed. However, further work on this topic is needed, especially since the reliability for these identity dimensions (particularly identity exploration) were lower than expected, which in part may have contributed to the insignificant findings for identity exploration.

**Friend's Gender and Psychosocial Adjustment**

**Friendship quality.** The gender of one’s friend has been related to friendship experiences, including the promotion of psychosocial adjustment (Grover et al., 2007). However, it was surprising that our study found that men with same-gender friends reported higher levels of friendship quality (including intimate disclosure) than those with other-gender friends, because their friendships with women are typically more intimate than their friendships with men (Roy et al., 2000). Nevertheless, because men tended to focus on activities with their friends (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009) and perceived same-gender friends to be less demanding than having friends of the other gender (Femlee, 1999), it follows that men’s same-gender friendships may be of higher quality than their friendships with women.

**Social physique anxiety.** Body image is one of the main stressors for emerging adults (Davison & McCabe, 2006). Additionally, perceived peer influence, perceived weight-related teasing, and the self-reported eating behaviors of friendship clique members all contribute significantly to the concurrent predictions of individuals’ eating pathology (Hutchinson et al., 2010). Therefore, it is clear that with whom individuals choose to keep company plays an important part in how they view themselves and their body. In the current study, we built upon this premise by finding that women reported more social physique anxiety when their friend was a man rather than a woman. In other words, women may feel more inferior (at least with respect to body image) when they report having close friendships with men. Other-gender friendships have been found to inform heterosexuals’ self-image; in other words, they learn whether they are attractive to the other gender (Monsour, 2002). As a result, women who name men as their best friends may report higher levels of such anxiety prior to other-gender friendship formation, and in turn removing themselves from women who might exacerbate their existing anxiety. Clearly, longitudinal designs that assist in teasing apart causality are needed. Subsequent research may help to determine to what extent these negative feelings exist, for how long, and with whom (just one’s male best friend vs. other male friends). However, we did not measure the extent of that other-gender friendship in regards to whether there were sexual interests or sexual behaviors between the two friends in the current study. Even if the friendships began as platonic, there is always a possibility for such friendships among heterosexuals to morph into friendships with benefits or romantic relationships over time. As a result, it follows that women were found to experience higher levels of social physique anxiety with male best friends. Furthermore, same-gender friendships involve different activities and conversations than other-gender friendships, and this could also account for the findings. Thus, this finding requires further investigation before firm conclusions can be drawn.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

In the current study we assessed friendships and their developmental significance, but at a single time point. Thus, scholars should utilize longitudinal or sequential studies in future research given the fluidity of emerging adults’ social lives (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Although our sample was ethnically diverse, it was entirely from the U.S., and thus may not be generalizable to other cultures. As a result, researchers should undertake the task of considering cultural variations for future work. As previously noted, participants may have considered friends with whom they did or did not engage in sexual behavior when completing the friendship experiences.
quality questionnaire. In the current study, participants were instructed that this best friendship should be nonromantic. Because participants were simultaneously asked to rate each parent, a best friend, and romantic partner, and most participants in the study identified a romantic partner (64.3%) in addition to a best friend, it seems unlikely that the designated friend was someone other than the intended platonic friendships. In fact, in another study where university students from across the U.S. completed both Social Provisions Questionnaire subscales for friendship and romantic relationship quality, Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, and Badger (2009) showed that each set of relationship qualities predicted different criteria for adulthood, thereby suggesting that participants had two different and conceptually distinct types of relationships in mind when answering these questions. Nevertheless, it remains possible that participants could have identified a friend “with benefits” (i.e., involving sexual activity, but no romantic feelings) or an emerging romantic partner). Consequently, future work should include a clear definition of a best friend (see Demir & Özdemir, 2010) to avoid possible study confounds.

Other demographic and behavioral characteristics of emerging adults’ best friends as well as other close friends from each friend’s perspective should be obtained in future work, as has been done by Demir and Özdemir (2010). In so doing, such studies could examine what the constellation of close friendships is really like and how they contribute jointly to adjustment. Lastly, the current study utilized a sample of emerging adults who were all university students, albeit at a range of types of institutions across the country. However, emerging adulthood is a qualitatively different experience for those who attend an institution of higher education versus do not (Sandefur, Eggerlig-Boeck, & Park, 2005), as they do not benefit from the same stable living arrangements as those who attend college (Sandefur et al., 2005). As a result, these emerging adults are likely to experience a different pattern of forming and retaining friendships over time as they transition from school to work at an earlier age.

Conclusion
Our study examined how gender and a best friend’s gender contribute to emerging adults’ psychosocial adjustment. We found gender differences in psychosocial adjustment, such that women fared better in self-worth, identity commitment, and friendship quality, but worse in social physique anxiety than did men. In particular, same-gender friendships were more beneficial to women in terms of those women reporting lower levels of social physique anxiety, and more beneficial to both men and women in their reporting higher levels of self-esteem compared to those with other-gender friendships. These findings highlight the importance of continued research on the role of gender in emerging-adults’ friendships.

References
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