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Friendship and Social Integration in the Lives of Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Women: A Thematic Review

Amistad e integración social en las vidas de mujeres inmigrantes y de minorías étnicas: una revisión temática

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Resumen: La amistad es una relación crucial pero poco explorada en la investigación sobre migración, integración y género. Los estudios existentes suelen centrarse en dominios institucionales como la educación, el empleo o la familia, mientras que las relaciones entre pares permanecen analítica y empíricamente desatendidas. Esta revisión de la literatura, desarrollada como parte del proyecto *FriendsMatter* (*Redes de Amistad, Integración Social y Sentido de Pertenencia entre Mujeres Inmigrantes y de Minorías Étnicas, 2023-2026*), examina cómo la amistad contribuye a la formación de la identidad, la integración social y el bienestar emocional de mujeres de origen inmigrante o pertenecientes a minorías étnicas (WIEMB, por sus siglas en inglés) durante la adultez emergente. Aunque el enfoque empírico del proyecto se centra en las WIEMB, la revisión se basa en un cuerpo más amplio de literatura que aborda tanto la migración como la minorización étnica, reconociendo que estas dimensiones a menudo se cruzan, pero no son sinónimas. Utilizando una estrategia de búsqueda estructurada y deliberada, se analizaron 71 artículos revisados por pares en tres ejes temáticos: el papel de la amistad femenina en la adultez emergente; la amistad como forma de capital social y apoyo en las vidas de mujeres migrantes y de minorías étnicas; y el desarrollo y la importancia de las amistades interétnicas. Los hallazgos destacan la capacidad de la amistad para fomentar el sentido de pertenencia, desafiar los prejuicios y mitigar las limitaciones estructurales que enfrentan las mujeres minorizadas. La revisión identifica vacíos conceptuales y empíricos clave, y hace un llamado a enfoques más interseccionales, longitudinales y sensibles al contexto para el estudio de la amistad, la integración y la cohesión social.
Palabras Clave: Amistad, Migración, Minorías étnicas, Mujeres, Adultez Emergente.

Abstract: Friendship is a crucial yet underexplored relationship in research on migration, integration, and gender. While existing studies often focus on institutional domains such as education, employment, or family, peer relationships remain analytically and empirically overlooked. This literature review, developed as part of the *FriendsMatter* project (Friendship Networks, Social Integration, and Belonging among Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Women, 2023-2026), examines how friendship contributes to identity formation, social integration, and emotional well-being among women of immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds (WIEMB) during emerging adulthood. While the empirical focus of the broader project centers on WIEMB, the review draws on a broader body of literature that addresses either migration or ethnic minorization, recognizing that these dimensions often intersect but are not synonymous. Using a structured and purposive search strategy, 71 peer-reviewed articles were analyzed across three thematic strands: the role of female friendship in emerging adulthood; friendship as a form of social capital and support in the lives of migrant and ethnic minority women; and the development and significance of interethnic friendships. Findings highlight friendship's capacity to foster belonging, challenge prejudice, and mitigate the structural constraints faced by minoritized women. The review identifies key conceptual and empirical gaps and calls for more intersectional, longitudinal, and context-sensitive approaches to the study of friendship, integration, and social cohesion.
Keywords: Friendship, Migration, Ethnic Minority, Women, Emerging Adulthood.

1. INTRODUCTION

Friendship is one of the most meaningful and rewarding social relationships across the life course. It contributes to well-being, offers both emotional and practical support, and plays a crucial role in processes of identity formation and belonging. Despite its psychological and sociological relevance, friendship has historically been undervalued in social science research (Pahl, 2000; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Munn et al., 2018; Beer & Gardner, 2015; Blatterer, 2022; Pahl, 2002; Vela-McConnell, 2017), where greater emphasis has been placed on institutionalized relationships such as kinship, marriage, or partnership. Yet even by the late 20th century, scholars had begun to recognize the emotional intensity, moral significance, and everyday centrality of friendship (Allan, 1989; Roseneil, 2004; Vela-McConnell, 1999; Jamieson, 1999), positioning it as a key domain for understanding contemporary social life. Recent scholarship further underscores that friendship occupies a distinct place in the landscape of intimate relationships: as a voluntary, non-institutionalized, and deeply personal bond, it enables moral learning, relational autonomy, and new forms of solidarity (Blatterer, 2022; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). These works highlight friendship not only as a source of intimacy and support but also as a valuable lens through which to examine broader questions of social cohesion, agency, and social change.

Gender plays a central role in how friendships are experienced and valued. Feminist scholarship has emphasized that women's friendships are often emotionally intense and solidaristic, yet also shaped by social expectations surrounding care, domesticity, and visibility (Fehr, 2000, Rawlins, 2009; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). These friendships may provide crucial spaces for empowerment, resistance, and emotional survival (Bachmann, 2014). Yet friendship has often been treated as universal, which obscures the ways it is mediated by intersecting structures of gender, class, race, and migration. In particular, the lived experiences of women navigating multiple layers of exclusion, such as those shaped by racialization, migration, and systemic inequality, remain underexamined in friendship research.

Alongside gender, the life stage of emerging adulthood introduces distinctive challenges and opportunities for relational development. Spanning the late teens to late twenties, this phase is characterized by identity exploration, instability, and social transition (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2006). For women of immigrant and ethnic minority background (WIEMB), emerging adulthood is often experienced at the intersection of cultural negotiation, social inequality, and systemic exclusion. Friendship networks during this time can offer vital emotional refuge, practical support, and pathways to belonging in the host society (Barry et al., 2009; Masten et al., 2004).

Framed within these intersecting concerns, this article presents a structured literature review conducted within the framework of the *FriendsMatter* project (Friendship Networks of Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Women that Are Conducive to Social Integration, 2023–2026).

While the empirical focus of the *FriendsMatter* project is on women of immigrant and ethnic minority background (WIEMB), we acknowledge that these categories are analytically distinct and do not always overlap. Ethnic minority status may derive from generational, racialized, or cultural positioning within the host society, regardless of migration history, while migrant status does not necessarily imply ethnic minoritization. This perspective aligns with intersectional and translocational approaches that emphasize how categories of identity are shaped by systems of power, social location, and historical context (Anthias, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). Nonetheless, both positions entail navigating exclusion, systemic inequality, and identity negotiation, all of which profoundly shape relational dynamics. In order to capture the full scope of scholarship relevant to friendship and integration, this review includes studies addressing either or both dimensions. Where applicable, we distinguish between these categories in our analysis, while recognizing the value of examining their intersections for understanding the relational practices and constraints experienced by WIEMB during emerging adulthood.

The review is organized around three thematic strands that structure both the *FriendsMatter* project and this synthesis: the role of female friendship in identity formation and emotional well-being during emerging adulthood; friendship as a form of social capital that supports social integration; and the development and significance of interethnic friendships in diverse societies. Each theme draws on relevant conceptual frameworks and empirical findings to assess what is known (and what remains underexplored) about friendship as a site of integration for WIEMB. The concluding discussion reflects these insights and outlines implications for future research and policy.

2. METHODS

This literature review was conducted to map and synthesize existing research relevant to the *FriendsMatter* project. Rather than adhering to the rigid protocols of a systematic review (Munn et al., 2018), it adopts a structured and purposive approach designed to capture a broad range of relevant themes at the intersection of friendship, migration, and social integration. The review was guided by three central research questions. First, *how do female friendships contribute to identity formation, emotional well-being, and personal development during emerging adulthood, particularly among WIEMB?* Second, *to what extent does friendship act as a form of social capital for WIEMB, and how does it support their social integration?* Third, *under what circumstances do interethnic friendships develop, and how do they contribute to fostering social cohesion, challenging prejudice, and promoting ethnic diversity?* These questions structured the selection, categorization, and thematic analysis of the reviewed literature, ensuring alignment with the broader objectives of *FriendsMatter*.

2.1. Search and sample selection

A structured and transparent literature search was conducted to identify and filter relevant scientific publications while ensuring both quality and comprehensiveness. The literature search was conducted between September 2023 and December 2023. The search was carried out using the Web of Science Core Collection, drawing from multiple databases to maximize coverage of the relevant literature. These included the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI, 1956–2023), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (AHCI, 1975–2023), the Book Citation Index – Social Sciences and Humanities (BKCI-SSH, 2005–Present), and the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI, 2015–2023).

The search strategy was designed to capture a broad range of studies aligned with the research questions guiding this review. To achieve this, a predefined set of keyword combinations was employed, reflecting the central themes of the *FriendsMatter* project. These included terms related to female friendship in emerging adulthood, the role of friendship in migration contexts, friendship as a form of social capital, and the impact of interethnic friendships on social integration. Specific keyword combinations used in the search included “female friendship and emerging adulthood”, “friendship and migration”, “friendship and migration and social capital”, “friendship and immigrant women”, “friendship and ethnic minority women”, “friendship and second-generation migrant”, “friendship and immigrant women and integration”, “friendship and ethnic minority women and integration”, “interethnic friendship”, “interethnic friendship and integration”, and “interethnic friendship and social capital”.

Given that ethnic minority status and migration status do not always coincide, the search strategy and inclusion criteria were designed to include studies that addressed either or both of these dimensions, provided they offered insight into the relational dynamics relevant to identity formation, belonging, or integration. This inclusive approach reflects the broader conceptual framework of the *FriendsMatter* project, which recognizes the intersectional experiences of racialized and migrant women (Crenshaw, 1991).

To ensure transparency and replicability, the review focused exclusively on peer-reviewed journal articles, excluding books, dissertations, and other non-peer-reviewed materials. No restrictions were placed on the publication date, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the literature over time. Given resource constraints, the search was limited to articles published in English.

2.2. Search result

A multi-stage screening process was applied to ensure the relevance of selected studies to the objectives of this review. The initial database search yielded 698 articles, identified through a series of keyword combinations reflecting the central themes of the *FriendsMatter* project. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 71 articles were retained for

in-depth analysis. All search results have been compiled in Table 1 below to facilitate the visualization of the sample the team worked with.

Keyword(s)	Nr of articles identified
Female friendship + emerging adulthood	25
Friendship + Migration	354
Friendship + Migration + Social capital	40
Friendship + Immigrant Women	49
Friendship + Ethnic Minority Women	15
Friendship + Second Generation migrant	13
Friendship + Immigrant Women + integration	11
Friendship + Ethnic Minority Women + Integration	2
Interethnic friendship	143
Interethnic Friendship + Integration	38
Interethnic Friendship + Social Capital	8
Final count	**698**

Table 1. Count of articles identified in the search for each keyword code

The inclusion criteria required that the studies explicitly examine friendship in relation to migration, ethnicity, and social integration. Studies that focused on either immigrant or ethnic minority women were considered eligible, in recognition that both groups may navigate overlapping forms of exclusion, systemic inequality, and identity negotiation that shape their friendship experiences. This decision was consistent with the review's intersectional focus and its aim to capture a wide spectrum of relevant relational contexts, in line with intersectionality as a framework for understanding how multiple systems of power and identity shape lived experience (Crenshaw, 1991; Anthias, 2012).

To refine the selection, a series of exclusion criteria were applied. First, articles that did not directly contribute to understanding the role of friendship in the integration of immigrant and ethnic minority women were excluded. Second, since the review focused on adolescents, young adults, and individuals in emerging adulthood, studies that dealt exclusively with childhood (of which there were many) were omitted. Third, due to translation limitations, only studies published in English were included in the final selection. Lastly, to avoid redundancy, duplicate records across different search results were identified and removed using Rayyan software (Ouzzani et al., 2016).

2.3. Final selection of articles

From the initial pool of 698 articles, three researchers independently screened each title and abstract to assess relevance and ensure interrater reliability. Articles were categorized as YES, NO, or MAYBE based on their alignment with the review's objectives. Those marked as MAYBE, or where reviewer judgments differed, underwent full-text review and team

discussion to reach consensus. Once agreement was achieved, the remaining articles were sorted into thematic categories aligned with the three guiding research questions.

In a second round of screening, further exclusion criteria were applied to refine the selection. As said above, studies focused exclusively on childhood were removed, as they fell outside the review's scope. Theoretical papers lacking empirical data were also excluded, along with articles that showed limited relevance to the *FriendsMatter* project's core themes. This process resulted in a final sample of 71 articles retained for thematic analysis.

3. FINDINGS: THEMATIC REVIEW OF EXISTING RESEARCH

In the following sections, we present and discuss a thematic synthesis of the selected and included articles, organized according to the three guiding research questions.

3.1. First strand of research: female friendship and emerging adulthood

This section addresses the first research question: *how do female friendships contribute to identity formation, emotional well-being, and personal development during emerging adulthood, particularly among WIEMB?* The literature reviewed highlights how gendered socialization, institutional settings, and life-stage transitions collectively shape the formation, meaning, and function of friendships for young women.

3.1.1. Friendship formation and gendered socialization

Across the literature on emerging adulthood, scholars emphasize how gendered expectations and social contexts influence friendship dynamics. Barzeva et al. (2022), for example, show that residential transitions can help socially withdrawn adolescents, particularly girls, expand their social networks, underscoring the environmental conditions that support relational growth. Similarly, Bohnert (2007) finds that participation in organized extracurricular activities during the transition to college improves friendship quality and reduces loneliness. These findings indicate that institutional and environmental opportunities are critical in shaping the conditions for forming and sustaining friendships.

Gendered norms also appear to structure the kinds of friendships that develop. DiDonato and Strough (2013) find that individuals tend to form friendships along gendered lines within stereotypically male or female activities. Even in professional and educational environments, these patterns are reproduced, suggesting that gendered perceptions continue to shape friendship behaviors well into emerging adulthood.

Socialization processes within families and peer groups also play a significant role. Glover et al. (2022) find that anti-racist attitudes and cross-race friendships in emerging adulthood are influenced by parental racial beliefs and early socialization. Likewise, Jenkins et al. (2023) show that sexist

attitudes and objectification in emerging adults are shaped by both peer and parental influences, suggesting that value systems embedded in early friendship networks have enduring effects on relational dynamics.

3.1.2. Friendship as a site of moral learning and social development

A number of studies underscore that friendship networks during adolescence and early adulthood serve not only as sources of emotional support but also as key sites of moral learning. Ha et al. (2021) provide evidence that coercive interactions in adolescent friendships can have long-term consequences, influencing violent behavior in later romantic relationships. Trinh and Choukas-Bradley (2018) similarly find that conversations among male undergraduates reinforce heteronormative norms, suggesting that peer interactions contribute to the continuity or disruption of dominant social scripts.

Research also highlights how the breakdown of friendships can reflect deeper interpersonal and developmental processes. Khullar et al. (2021) identify three core behaviors associated with friendship dissolution among emerging adults: termination, distancing, and compartmentalization. Their findings indicate that perceived transgressions, communication patterns, and relational goals are all factors in the maintenance or dissolution of friendships. This aligns with broader evidence that the quality of peer relationships is a strong predictor of psychological well-being during this life stage.

3.1.3. Female friendships as "homeplaces" and identity anchors

For women navigating intersecting systems of racial, gendered, and social marginalization, same-gender friendships often serve as emotional sanctuaries. Leath et al. (2022), studying Black undergraduate women at predominantly white institutions, show that same-race friendships function as buffers against racialized experiences and contribute to identity affirmation. These relationships offer validation and protection, particularly in contexts of systemic bias.

Other studies link close female friendships to broader ethical and developmental outcomes. Mackinnon et al. (2016) associate intimate friendships with a sense of generativity, or concern for future generations, suggesting that such ties may foster social responsibility. Morgan and Korobov (2012) explore how shared storytelling among close friends, especially about romantic experiences, supports identity co-construction and interpersonal meaning-making. In a related vein, Padilla-Walker et al. (2018) examine the persistence of prosocial behaviors, such as defending and including others, during the transition to adulthood. Although these behaviors slightly decline, their variability highlights the ongoing importance of friendships as spaces for ethical development.

Taken together, the reviewed studies suggest that female friendships during emerging adulthood are shaped by both structural contexts and relational agency. They offer key developmental functions: emotional

intimacy, moral guidance, identity reinforcement, and resilience. While not all studies directly address WIEMB, the patterns observed offer valuable insights into how friendship can support navigation of social barriers and personal growth in this life stage.

3.2. Second strand of research: friendship, social capital, and the navigation of boundaries

This section addresses the second research question: *to what extent does friendship act as a form of social capital for WIEMB, and how does it support their social integration?* The literature reviewed illustrates that friendship serves not only as a source of emotional well-being but also as a crucial relational resource in navigating complex migration contexts and broader social structures.

3.2.1. Friendship as social capital and support

A growing body of research identifies friendship as central to migrant adaptation and resilience. Ye and Chen (2020), for example, find that daily contact with local friends improves self-reported health among domestic workers in Hong Kong, particularly when family is also nearby. Similarly, Auhagen and Schwarzer (1994) observe that the formation of new friendships post-migration can significantly reduce loneliness, particularly among women. Studies by Hoare (2022) and Kneer et al. (2019) further emphasize the emotional and psychological value of peer support for adolescent refugees, while Liu (2013) highlights how weak ties (casual or situational relationships) can shape migration decisions and settlement experiences.

Beyond emotional support, several studies underscore that friendship ties also influence cultural assimilation and social participation. Facchini et al. (2015) find that immigrants with native friends are more likely to adopt host society norms, highlighting friendship's bridging function in integration processes. Conversely, Poveda and de Vilhena (2014) show that co-ethnic friendships may reinforce home-country values and affect partner selection, sometimes curbing interethnic interaction. Liu (2013) also underscores the importance of weaker social ties during early settlement, particularly in navigating employment and housing transitions.

3.2.2. Friendship formation and support in the lives of racialized and migrant women

The formation and function of friendships among WIEMB are shaped by intersecting structures of gender, migration, class, and cultural norms. Several studies emphasize how caregiving responsibilities, limited labor market participation, or religious norms restrict WIEMB's opportunities to engage in diverse social interactions. Seibel (2020) and Eisikovits (2000), for example, find that migrant women tend to have less frequent contact with natives compared to men, often due to mobility limitations and domestic obligations. Eisikovits notes that migrant boys more often socialize outside

of school, while girls rely on formal or institutional settings, such as schools and community programs, where interethnic friendships can develop.

Friendship preferences are also structured by social positioning and emotional proximity. Gill and Bialski (2011) report that Polish migrants in the UK tend to form friendships within similar socioeconomic classes, while Ibnu (2022) shows that Malay students in the UK prioritize cultural familiarity when selecting friends. Emotional closeness and perceived similarity often outweigh availability. Chávez et al. (2021) and Karatas et al. (2021) demonstrate that empathy and low levels of prejudice are key enablers of interethnic ties among adolescents and refugee youth. Spatial dynamics also matter: Cuba and Hummon (1993) argue that place-based identities influence where and how friendships form. Ebaugh and Curry (2000) highlight the role of fictive kinship, namely, non-biological but kin-like ties rooted in cultural or religious practices, as vital informal support networks that offer emotional, material, and logistical aid.

Friendship networks can also become spaces of resistance, healing, and identity rearticulation. Branyon (2017) describes how public libraries create inclusive environments where immigrant women can build and sustain friendships. Mendez et al. (2023) show that Tertulias, informal women's discussion circles, serve as critical platforms for collective expression and mutual support among women recovering from trauma or domestic violence. These examples reveal how friendship operates not only as emotional support but also as a structurally meaningful and politically situated resource.

Friendship also enables WIEMB to challenge isolation and negotiate competing cultural expectations. Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of targeted programs that address the loneliness experienced by Latina immigrants during early resettlement. Mitra and Basit (2021) explore how second-generation Muslim women use friendships to resist restrictive gender norms, assert autonomy, and expand their social agency.

Taken together, these studies illustrate that friendship for WIEMB is far more than an interpersonal dynamic; it is a relational practice shaped by broader social forces. Whether formed through informal peer groups, co-ethnic kinship networks, or intercultural ties fostered by schools and community institutions, these friendships serve as essential sources of resilience, belonging, and integration, particularly where formal institutional supports are weak or exclusionary. By recognizing friendship as a conduct of both emotional care and structural navigation, this body of research advances our understanding of integration as a relational, gendered, and context-dependent process.

3.3. Third strand of research: the dynamics of interethnic friendships

Interethnic friendships play a critical yet underexamined role in the social integration of immigrant and ethnic minority women. This strand synthesizes scholarship on the conditions under which such friendships

emerge, along with their relational and structural implications. It draws on studies across four main domains: educational institutions, community contexts, identity processes, and the challenges of prejudice. Together, these perspectives illuminate how interethnic ties foster belonging, promote cohesion, and challenge social boundaries.

3.3.1. Educational institutions and the school context

Educational settings are often central to the development of interethnic friendships, particularly during youth and emerging adulthood. However, the literature cautions that ethnic diversity within schools does not, in itself, foster meaningful cross-group connections (Smith et al., 2016; Stark & Flache, 2012; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009). Some studies find no strong correlation between diverse classrooms and increased belonging (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009), while others highlight the value of intentional and structured interventions such as cooperative learning, literary discussions, and dialogic pedagogies that promote sustained interethnic engagement (Belet, 2018; Khalfaoui et al., 2023; Santiago-Garabieta et al., 2023).

Research also underscores how institutional structures mediate friendship formation. Tracking, or ability-based grouping, can limit interethnic contact unless accompanied by inclusive practices and identity-affirming spaces (Bohman & Miklikowska, 2021; Van Praag et al., 2015). Studies show that cross-ethnic friendships can enhance inclusive attitudes and academic motivation, particularly for minority youth with strong ethnic identities (Cardinali et al., 2016; Lorenz et al., 2021). Friendship preferences are often shaped by perceived cultural proximity and prevailing norms; shared values encourage cross-group ties, while experiences of exclusion tend to reinforce co-ethnic bonding (Colak et al., 2019). Emerging evidence suggests that online platforms may also facilitate interethnic connection by reducing physical and social barriers to contact (Hofstra, 2022).

3.3.2. Community dynamics, spatial composition, and social cohesion

Beyond educational settings, interethnic friendships are shaped by broader spatial, economic, and social environments. While ethnically mixed neighborhoods can increase the likelihood of cross-group contact (Kouvo & Lockmer, 2013), residential proximity alone is insufficient. Class stratification, racialized segregation, and unequal exposure to majority-group members often constrain the formation of deep or sustained interethnic ties (Britton, 2011; Pratsinakis et al., 2017).

Socioeconomic status plays a significant role. High-SES immigrants are more likely to develop friendships with majority-group individuals, while low-SES migrants often reside in more insular co-ethnic communities, with fewer opportunities for interethnic engagement (Kruse, 2017). Previous contact with majority-group peers, and participation in diverse workplaces, can expand interethnic networks, especially for migrants with limited education or economic vulnerability (Fong & Isajiw, 2000; Kokkonen et al.,

2015). Other demographic variables, such as age, gender, and education, further shape contact patterns (Savelkoul et al., 2015).

Civil society organizations (CSOs) also function as important relational spaces, though their effectiveness varies by group. In some cases, CSO involvement has been shown to foster interethnic friendships (e.g., among ethnic Indian participants in the UK), while in other contexts, effects are neutral or even exclusionary (Wang & Morav, 2021). Leisure environments such as youth centers or sports clubs may provide low-threshold settings for contact, but often lead to weaker ties that lack the depth needed to foster trust or solidarity (Kivijärvi, 2015; Marucco, 2020). Across these contexts, the literature converges on the importance of shared activities and sustained interaction in transforming casual contact into meaningful relationships.

3.3.3. Identity formation and belonging

Interethnic friendships are closely tied to identity processes, particularly in contexts of migration. Studies suggest that individuals with strong ethnic identities often gravitate toward co-ethnic friendships, whereas those with hybrid or host-oriented identities are more likely to engage in interethnic ties (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2018; Muttarak, 2014). These dynamics evolve over time: while co-ethnic friendships may dominate during early resettlement, interethnic friendships often increase across generations, reflecting shifting identities and increasing integration (Muttarak, 2014).

However, the relationship between identity and contact is not always reciprocal. While immigrants with strong national identification are more likely to be chosen as friends by natives, simply having native friends does not consistently lead to stronger identification with the host country (Leszczensky et al., 2016; Schachner et al., 2015; Titzmann & Silbereisen, 2009). Among Asian-American students, for instance, same-ethnic friendships are linked to ethnic identity development, while interracial friendships are associated with perceptions of school safety (Chen & Graham, 2017).

Other structural and affective factors also shape the formation and depth of interethnic ties. Intercultural sensitivity has been identified as a key enabler of bridging social capital, suggesting that cross-cultural competence facilitates deeper and more reciprocal friendships (Tamam & Hashmi, 2016). Variables such as language fluency, housing stability, and the intention to remain in the host society also influence relational trajectories (Martinovic et al., 2009). Some studies suggest that interethnic friendships not only support belonging but can lead to long-term outcomes such as interethnic romantic relationships, further highlighting their integrative potential (Van Zantvliet & Kalmijn, 2013).

3.3.4. Acculturation, prejudice, and the persistence of discrimination

Finally, the literature highlights how both structural and interpersonal barriers, such as discrimination, prejudice, and linguistic marginalization,

complicate the formation of interethnic friendships. Titzmann (2014) argues that encouraging language use and fostering welcoming environments are essential to overcoming ethnic homophily. Language, in particular, acts as both a communicative tool and a symbolic boundary. Kogan et al. (2021) show that accented speech can hinder intelligibility and reduce perceptions of social belonging.

Religious and cultural differences may further affect trust and cohesion. Koopmans and Veit (2014) caution that negative interactions in diverse settings may undermine intergroup trust, particularly when contact is superficial or competitive. Conversely, high-quality interethnic friendships are consistently associated with lower levels of prejudice (Bentsen, 2022). However, when contact occurs in hierarchical or exclusionary settings, it may reproduce rather than challenge social distance (Thomsen & Rafiqi, 2018).

Discrimination also undermines the potential of interethnic friendships. Studies show that feelings of inauthenticity or experiences of exclusion can inhibit the development of trust across group lines (Bauer & Hannover, 2020; Manevska et al., 2018). Importantly, attitudes toward diversity mediate the effects of contact: individuals who already value ethnic diversity are more likely to benefit from interethnic interactions, while those with exclusionary views may resist or distort such relationships. These findings suggest that contact alone is not enough. Instead, intentional strategies such as inclusive programs and intercultural training are needed to support authentic, equitable, and prejudice-reducing relationships.

Together, these studies show that interethnic friendships are deeply embedded in institutional, spatial, and cultural contexts. Their formation is shaped not simply by personal preference, but by the structures and norms that enable or constrain meaningful interaction. For WIEMB, interethnic friendships may provide routes to belonging, recognition, and social integration. Yet these benefits are most likely to emerge when such relationships are supported by equitable policies, inclusive practices, and sustained intercultural engagement. The literature reviewed here underscores that friendship, often treated as a private or incidental tie, is in fact a crucial site where broader dynamics of identity, inequality, and cohesion play out.

4. DISCUSSION

This review has examined how friendship functions as a site of emotional, cultural, and social integration for women of immigrant and ethnic minority background (WIEMB) during emerging adulthood. While the broader literature on migration and social relationships is extensive, our findings confirm that friendship has often been overlooked in favor of more institutional domains such as family or education. This is particularly true in research addressing gender. Despite the high number of studies identified on friendship and migration, only a fraction directly explore the experiences of WIEMB, and even fewer address the complexity of interethnic friendships. This imbalance reveals a notable gap in relationship science and migration

research, where the gendered and relational dimensions of integration remain under-theorized.

The *FriendsMatter* project responds to this gap by foregrounding the centrality of peer relationships in shaping the social trajectories of WIEMB. In line with the project's intersectional approach, this review included studies focused on either immigrant or ethnic minority women, or both, recognizing that these categories often intersect but are not synonymous. Migration and ethnic minoritization entail distinct processes of marginalization that operate across time and place, and friendship networks respond differently to racialization, mobility constraints, and access to public space. This framing draws on intersectional and translocational perspectives that emphasize how systems of power, spatial location, and social stratification shape lived experiences and identity formation (Crenshaw, 1991; Anthias, 2009). Including both groups allowed us to map a broader range of relational dynamics and highlight the specific mechanisms through which friendship supports identity, well-being, and social integration. Emerging adulthood, a period marked by identity formation, instability, and transition (Arnett, 2000; Khullar et al., 2021), presents both risks and opportunities. Friendships formed during this phase often provide a vital scaffold for navigating structural barriers, including language acquisition (Martinovic et al., 2009), employment precarity (Kruse, 2017), and experiences of discrimination (Bauer & Hannover, 2020). However, as the literature shows, these processes are highly uneven. Migrant women, particularly those with limited access to public life due to caregiving responsibilities or cultural expectations, face distinct challenges in forming and sustaining diverse friendship networks (Seibel, 2020; Eisikovits, 2000). Their friendships often depend on school-based interventions, religious or ethnic community spaces, and informal female-centered networks, all of which are shaped by the intersecting constraints of gender, class, and migration status.

Three main insights emerge from the review. First, high-quality friendships, whether intra-ethnic or interethnic, are consistently associated with well-being, identity affirmation, and integration outcomes. Emotional support, access to information, and a sense of belonging are among the most frequently cited benefits (Hoare, 2022; Ye & Chen, 2020). However, not all friendships serve the same function. Weaker ties, such as acquaintances or workplace contacts, often provide instrumental support that is particularly valuable in the early stages of settlement (Liu, 2013; Ebaugh & Curry, 2000).

Second, the formation and durability of friendships are shaped by contextual factors such as gender norms, opportunity structures, and cultural proximity. Women with lower labor market participation or restricted mobility often report fewer opportunities for interethnic interaction (Seibel, 2020; Eisikovits, 2000). This has implications for how friendship functions not only as emotional support but also as a relational gateway to broader integration. In such cases, friendship networks become especially critical as a form of compensatory social capital.

Third, friendship preferences are shaped by complex identity negotiations. Co-ethnic friendships often provide emotional safety and cultural continuity, what some scholars have referred to as "homeplaces" (Leath et al., 2022), while interethnic friendships, when sustained through trust and reciprocity, contribute to social cohesion and reduce prejudice (Bentsen, 2022; Van Zantvliet & Kalmijn, 2013). Yet these outcomes are not guaranteed. They depend on the conditions in which contact occurs, including the presence of inclusive spaces and shared activities that promote meaningful interaction (Khalfaoui et al., 2023; Santiago-Garabieta et al., 2023).

From a policy perspective, recognizing friendship as a unit of social intervention is essential. Most integration strategies continue to focus on schools, families, or employment, but often overlook the relational dynamics that unfold in informal or peer-based contexts. Programs that support friendship formation in community libraries, women's discussion groups, or digital platforms (Branyon, 2017; Mendez et al., 2023) have shown promise in fostering inclusion and resilience. Similarly, structured school-based initiatives, such as cooperative learning and dialogic literary gatherings, demonstrate how intentional design can enhance interethnic understanding (Belet, 2018; Khalfaoui et al., 2023).

Overall, this review contributes to relationship science by reframing friendship as both a personal and structurally embedded phenomenon. For WIEMB, friendships are not only a source of emotional support but also a form of agency in contexts where formal inclusion may be limited.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although this review offers a structured synthesis of current knowledge, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, much of the available literature is cross-sectional and fragmented across disciplines. Few studies employ intersectional frameworks that account for the interlocking effects of gender, race, class, and migration status. Additionally, there is a lack of longitudinal research that traces how friendship networks evolve over time or in response to life transitions and changing integration contexts.

Future studies should adopt intersectional and longitudinal designs to examine how the quality, durability, and strategic use of friendships are shaped by broader processes of exclusion, inclusion, and social mobility. Mixed-method and participatory research approaches could also illuminate the lived experiences and agency of WIEMB in forming and maintaining friendships.

This review forms the conceptual basis for the empirical phase of the *FriendsMatter* project, which will explore many of these questions through fieldwork with WIEMB in diverse urban contexts. By anchoring future research into the everyday relational practices of this group, we aim to contribute not only to theoretical advancement but also to more inclusive integration policies that recognize the power of peer relationships.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This literature review has examined how friendship operates as a socially embedded, affectively rich, and structurally mediated relationship within the contexts of migration, gender, and integration. Across diverse bodies of work, friendship emerges not only as a site of emotional intimacy and personal development, but also as a key mechanism through which individuals navigate belonging, exclusion, and cultural negotiation in host societies.

By organizing the literature into three thematic strands, namely, identity and personal development, friendship as social capital, and interethnic relational dynamics, this review has illuminated how friendships are shaped by broader systems of inequality, including gender norms, racialization, socioeconomic stratification, and spatial marginalization. These ties matter not only for those who are the focus of the *FriendsMatter* research, namely women of immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds in emerging adulthood, but more broadly across varied migrant experiences and stages of life.

Rather than treating friendship as a secondary or informal tie, this review positions it as central to the everyday practices through which integration, resilience, and social connection are forged. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges institutionally narrow or assimilationist views of integration and instead emphasizes relational, emotional, and peer-based forms of social participation.

This synthesis lays the conceptual groundwork for the empirical phase of the *FriendsMatter* project while also pointing to critical gaps in current research. Future studies should pay closer attention to how friendship is experienced, constrained, and strategically used across different social locations, and to how these dynamics evolve over time. Greater emphasis on intersectional, relational, and longitudinal approaches will be essential for developing more inclusive theories of integration and belonging.

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