

Trans and non-binary Latin American migrants in London: An intersectional analysis of migration and psychological well-being

Abstract

This study explores the experiences of trans and non-binary Latin American migrants in London, addressing a gap in research on queer migration and well-being outside the US context. Using semi-structured interviews and 'walking interviews' with seven participants, this research examines the participants' migration motives, gender resocialisation, and interactions within queer and Latin American communities in London. A thematic analysis, guided by intersectionality and minority stress theory as theoretical lenses, produced four key themes: (1) Latin American culture and family dynamics: tradition and hostility contributing to distancing; (2) migration as a catalyst for gender identity exploration; (3) intersectional challenges in London: transphobia, xenophobia, and psychological well-being; and (4) queer integrations: support systems, activism, and the need for intersectional thinking. The study emphasises the challenges of identity navigation, the systemic barriers faced by participants, and the psychological impact of these intersecting forms of oppression. It highlights the need for tailored support services for trans and non-binary Latin American individuals in healthcare, employment, and community support. It also advocates for more comprehensive, culturally sensitive, intersectional research and policy development approaches.

Keywords: trans, non-binary, Latin America, queer migration, well-being, intersectionality, minority stress theory

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Introduction

Trans and non-binary refers to individuals whose gender identities and expressions do not (exclusively) align with the gender assigned to them at birth, such as trans men, trans women, and those whose gender does not fit these binary categorisations (Cordoba, 2022). While trans and non-binary people have become more widely recognised, they face increased risks of discrimination (Bayrakdar & King, 2023) and psychological distress (Klinger et al., 2024). In the UK, trans and non-binary individuals face increasing levels of societal exclusion and violence, often driven by anti-trans rhetoric (Vincent et al., 2020). For instance, this hostile environment has led to nearly a 200% rise in violent crimes reported by trans and non-binary people (Flatley, 2023). This discrimination occurs not only in public discourse but also in these individuals' direct experiences with care. The Trans Lives Survey in the UK reported that 70% of respondents encountered transphobia in healthcare settings, with 45% feeling that their general practitioner did not understand their needs, and 57% avoiding their GP when unwell, thus restricting their access to care and widening health disparities (Flatley, 2023). The discrimination faced by trans and non-binary individuals in various contexts appears to also intersect with their migration circumstances. For trans and non-binary migrants, these stressors and subsequent health outcomes are often magnified. For instance, Gowin et al. (2017) found that while some stressors decreased for 45 Mexican trans women after migrating to the US, they continued to face severe mental health issues, including PTSD, depression, and substance abuse, exacerbated by limited healthcare access and various forms of oppression such as transphobia and xenophobia. Studies on 'queer migration', which focus on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, non-binary, and queer migrants, have predominantly focused on the experiences of Latin American migrants within the US context (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2007; Cantú, 2009; Epstein & Carrillo, 2014). These studies have significantly enhanced our understanding of the intersection between migration and gender/sexuality, shedding light on the reasons queer individuals migrate, their experiences in new settings, and the ways their identities evolve post-migration. However, there remains a gap in understanding how these dynamics apply to trans and non-binary Latin American migrants in other regions, such as the UK. The present research, therefore, focuses on the experiences of trans and non-binary Latin Americans living in London, an invisible population that has yet to be explored in academic research.

Queer migration

Building on the broader context of Latin American migration, queer migration research has suggested that queer individuals may migrate for reasons intrinsically linked to their sexual and gender identities beyond just economic or familial factors. Carrillo (2004), for instance, argues that 'sexual migration' can reshape sexual practices and identities, a theory that likely extends to gender identities and expressions, particularly for trans and non-binary individuals. The pressures of machismo, dominant Catholic ideologies, strong family structures, and heteronormative social environments in Latin American countries often compel queer individuals to seek refuge in cities like New York, Los Angeles, or London, where they can express their identities more freely and escape restrictive religious and familial expectations (Weston, 1995).

In addition to broad economic reasons, such as prioritising labour skills, higher income or work opportunities (Cantú, 2009), queer Latin American migrants are also driven by factors such as the pursuit of personal freedoms and the need to escape violence (Rodriguez, 2011). Moreover, Hernández Galván (2019) asserts that systemic violence and discrimination frequently force queer migrants into displacement as a survival strategy, pushing them to seek environments that are more accepting and equitable regarding sexual and gender identities. For instance, Latin America and the Caribbean report the highest number of murders, accounting for 70% of global cases. The data highlights troubling patterns related to misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and whorephobia, with most victims being Black trans women, trans women of colour, and trans sex workers. Brazil has the highest number of cases for the 17th consecutive year, representing 30% of the total murders in the world (TGEU, 2024). It is important to note, however, that several Latin American countries allow trans individuals to change their name and gender on official documents without needing surgery or

extensive legal procedures. This is the case in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Uruguay. However, the enforcement of these laws can vary widely across the region (Malta et al., 2019). In Paraguay and Venezuela, for instance, there are no specific legal protections or anti-discrimination laws for trans people.

Migration thus serves as a critical pathway not only to avoid persecution but also to explore and affirm sexual desires and undergo gender identity transformations (Howe et al., 2008).

London, in particular, has become a hub for queer culture and a destination for queer migrants, thanks to its representation in media and cultural platforms (Mole et al., 2017). The UK's progressive advancements in rights and sexual citizenship, such as legalising same-sex marriage and the perception of greater sexual freedom, have further solidified London's appeal (Richardson, 2000). A recent qualitative study (Valenzuela, 2021) which explored the experiences of 14 Latin American gay men in London suggested that most participants preferred London due to its anonymity, multiculturalism, and super-diversity over their native cities, which tended to be traditional, less anonymous, and more homogenous due to small, familial networks. The gay men in this study also tended to avoid Latin American culture, venues, and people, as these reminded them of the traditional, small-network culture they left behind in favour of a 'gay haven' (Binnie, 2004). Instead, they held strong connections to queer culture, venues, and people in London. These spaces and connections were seen as significant in their process of sexual and gender resocialisation, a process of diversifying their sexual and gendered practices, as well as their identity construction as 'gay-first; Latino-second.' Participants also reported that migrating to London aided in their ability to challenge normativities (e.g., heteronormative gender/sexual roles, discussing sexual health, etc.) engrained in Latin American culture.

Migration of Latin Americans to the UK

The UK is home to an estimated 250,000 Latin Americans, with approximately 58% (145,000) residing in London. Among the most prominent groups are Brazilians, Colombians, Ecuadorians, Argentinians, Venezuelans, and Mexicans (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2016). For Latin American migrants in the UK, the journey is often fraught with numerous challenges and barriers, including navigating the complexities of the EU Settlement Scheme post-Brexit (as many Latin Americans hold EU citizenship), experiencing violations of workers' rights, facing discrimination and unlawful evictions by landlords, and dealing with limited access to accurate information regarding welfare benefits and healthcare services (Turcatti & Vargas-Silva, 2022). The language barrier exacerbates these difficulties with a shortage of official information available in Spanish and Portuguese (Turcatti & Vargas-Silva, 2022). Additionally, many Latin American migrants, despite being highly skilled, struggle to secure stable, well-paid employment. They often find themselves in precarious, low-paying jobs that contribute to deskilling, social exclusion, and low levels of social integration (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2019).

The increasing number of Latin Americans in the UK, particularly in London, mirrors broader global migration trends driven by economic and educational opportunities, social networks, and family reunification (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2016). Despite these trends, there is still a lack of research on the specific migration motivations and experiences of trans and non-binary Latin Americans in the UK.

Challenges faced by trans and non-binary Latin American migrants

Despite the opportunities that migration to cities like London can provide, Latin American queer migrants, particularly those who are trans and non-binary, face compounded challenges. Trans and non-binary individuals frequently confront heightened socioeconomic challenges, increased exposure to traumatic events, and elevated stress levels attributable to gender minority stress – a concept stemming from societal discrimination and stigma that contributes to adverse mental health outcomes such as anxiety and depression (Bränström et al., 2016; Hunter et al., 2021; Meyer, 2003). Migration further influences health as a critical social determinant, profoundly affecting migrants' social status and access to resources in their new country (Davies et al., 2009). Migratory experiences can significantly impact identity formation, social participation, and overall well-being, often complicated by language barriers, non-recognition of qualifications, limited career opportunities, and lack of social networks (Kawashima, 2021).

Nonetheless, Gailits et al. (2022) reported that Latin American trans women in Canada sought safety through migration but encountered compounded forms of oppression, such as transphobia and xenophobia. These intersecting oppressions manifested in challenges related to housing, employment, social connections, and social status, adversely affecting their health and well-being. Nonetheless, these women exhibited resilience by employing strategic approaches to navigate and resist power imbalances, actively seeking safety, community engagement, and mutual support. This is consistent with previous research on minority stress, which shows that 'community resilience' (Meyer, 2015) or connections to the queer community and support can alleviate some of the negative repercussions of discrimination.

Current study

Despite the foundational work done on queer migration in the US, there is a lack of empirical research addressing how trans and non-binary Latin American migrants experience migration in the UK. We do not yet fully understand how these individuals navigate the intersection of their gender identities with a new country's cultural expectations and systems. For instance, while studies like Valenzuela's (2021) have shed light on the experiences of Latin American gay men in London, revealing their preference for the city's anonymity and diversity, these studies have not accounted for the specific challenges faced by trans and non-binary individuals.

To address these gaps in the literature, this study employs a qualitative approach using innovative methodologies, including 'walking interviews' (Marcotte et al., 2022), to conduct semi-structured interviews with seven trans and non-binary Latin Americans residing in London. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences within the urban landscape of London, capturing the nuances of their migration journeys and daily interactions.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) with intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991). The minority stress model posits that exposure to homophobic and transphobic social environments contributes to negative health outcomes, including depression and suicidal ideation (Meyer, 2003). Intersectionality theory, introduced by Crenshaw (1991), explores how individuals can experience multiple layers of discrimination based on intersecting aspects of their identity, such as gender, ethnicity, immigration status, religion, and social class. These intersecting factors can lead to complex forms of oppression and privilege, affecting life opportunities and contributing to various types of inequality, including those related to health, material resources, and economic disparities. Intersectionality also examines how these systems of oppression are perpetuated by power structures within social contexts and institutions. For example, trans and non-binary migrants may experience compounded forms of oppression through racism, xenophobia, classism, transphobia, and homophobia (Balsam et al., 2011). This combined framework facilitates a nuanced exploration of how trans and non-binary Latin American migrants in London interpret their migration experiences and current realities in negotiating their identities and well-being. Guided by minority stress and intersectionality theories, this study aims to explore how trans and non-binary Latin American individuals in London understand their migration histories with their gender identities, assess how their experiences of migration affect their psychological well-being, and investigate how they navigate their identities within both Latin American and queer communities in London.

Methodology

Participant recruitment and inclusion criteria

Participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: identifying as trans and/or non-binary, having lived in London for at least one year, and being over 18 years old. We employed several recruitment techniques, including snowballing sampling via social media, relevant organisations, and the researchers' networks. We recruited seven participants using, following Braun & Clarke's (2021) guidelines for small projects (involving 6-10 participants using thematic analysis). While we intended to recruit ten participants, recruitment proved challenging, potentially reflecting the researchers' insider/outsider positionalities discussed in the reflexivity section below. Demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. The participants came from diverse backgrounds, spanning lower to higher socioeconomic statuses. Some were raised in rural regions, while others grew up in large, capital

cities across Latin America. As outlined in the results section, they also experienced various levels of access to educational and professional opportunities.

Table 1. Demographic information

Pseudonym	Gender	Pronouns	Age	Place of birth	Years in London	Occupation	Interview Language
Ana	Woman	ella/she	48	State of Paraná, Brazil	23	University student	English
Carmen	Woman	ella/she	28	Mexico City, Mexico	6	Designer; barista	Spanish
Sam	Non-binary	elle/they	44	Bogotá, Colombia	6	Non-profit manager; psychologist	Spanish
Isabel	Woman	ella/she	44	Cochabamba, Bolivia	1.5	Asylum seeker; hairstylist	Spanish
Val	Non-binary	any	29	Countryside near Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	3	Psychiatry trainee; artist	English
Kai	Non-binary	elle/they	40	Caracas, Venezuela	10	Psychotherapy student; masseuse	English
Dani	Woman	ella/she	33	State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	6	Sex worker	Portuguese

Data collection and ethical considerations

In the present study, we used ‘walking interviews’ as one of the data collection techniques. Walking interviews are a semi-structured technique in which a researcher and participant walk together while the interviews take place (Kinney, 2021). Walking interviews have been shown to reduce power imbalance between the researcher and the participant, establish rapport, encourage spontaneous conversation, and situate the participants in their broader context, wherein the environment prompts discussions (Carpiano, 2009).

Three interviews were conducted using walking interviews, three were conducted in a public space such as a café or pub, and one was conducted online via Microsoft Teams. This was due to the inclement weather and participants’ preferences agreed upon during recruitment. All interviews followed the same interview schedule, asking participants about their migration histories in the context of their gender and sexual identities, how they navigate their identities among Latin American and queer communities and their psychological well-being. Interviews took approximately one hour each (*M* duration = 63.28min). The primary investigator conducted three interviews in Spanish and two in English; the third author conducted one in English and one in Portuguese. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and checked for accuracy by the research team. As a thank-you gift for contributing to this research and for their time, participants were compensated with a Prezzee e-voucher worth £20. This contribution incentivised participation and was a symbolic and material act acknowledging and valuing the participants’ insights and experiences.

This study received ethical approval from [University name] Ethics Committee [number]. All interviews were anonymised, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data analysis

The research team employed thematic analysis (TA) to systematically analyse and elucidate patterns within the qualitative data, following the latest guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2021). TA is a flexible method for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within data, allowing for a nuanced understanding of complex phenomena. The researchers immersed themselves in the data to deeply familiarise themselves with the content. This initial phase of familiarisation involved repeated readings of the transcripts, allowing the research team to engage fully with the participants’ narratives and the complex intersections of their identities and experiences. Using Word as the primary software for analysis, all three authors generated codes that captured essential elements of the participants’ discussions, such as their migration histories, experiences with queer and Latin American communities, and emotional responses to living in London. These codes were then collaboratively reviewed, refined, and organised into broader themes by the entire research team during two meetings, comparing and contrasting themes and agreeing on their central importance. From these codes, themes were carefully developed, considering how they aligned with the research questions. Specifically, the analysis focused on understanding how trans and non-binary Latin American participants in London

navigate their migration histories within the context of their gender and sexual identities, the emotional impact of their positive and negative experiences in London, and their navigation of identities and experiences within Latin American and queer communities in the city. However, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) guidelines, the team remained open to unexpected themes from the data, ensuring that the analysis was comprehensive and grounded in the participants' lived experiences.

Reflexivity

Acknowledging Braun and Clarke's (2021) emphasis on reflexivity, the team engaged in an interpretive process in which themes were not merely descriptive but actively conceptualised to address the research questions and the study's psychological and intersectional dimensions, with the team continuously reflecting on how their positionalities – such as gender identities, sexualities, countries of origin, and personal experiences – might influence their interpretations. This reflexive approach was essential, given the focus on sensitive topics such as migration, gender identity, and community belonging. The themes were informed by the research questions and shaped by the research team's lived experiences and insights, adding depth and context to the analysis.

The primary investigator is an immigrant from Colombia who identifies as a cis gay man; the second author identifies as an immigrant from Spain who is a queer, non-binary person; and the third author is an immigrant from Brazil who identifies as a cis gay man. The research team maintains a wide range of insider/outsider positions in this research (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015), which informed our analytical lens as researchers. Our insider perspectives were favourable in sharing lived experiences with the participants, making us better equipped to understand participants' language and communication styles and enhancing our interpretations of the data (Chávez, 2015). However, some of our outsider perspectives, such as our level of education, cisgenderness, and whiteness, may have created barriers in fully comprehending the lived experience of our participants due to our lack of personal experience with racism and classism, for example.

Results

Following the thematic analysis, we formulated four main themes, each with two or three subthemes (see Table 2). These themes explore the complex and diverse experiences of trans and non-binary individuals from Latin America as they navigate their identities in the overlapping contexts of their past life in Latin America and their new life in London. This transition provided them with a sense of freedom, but it also presented numerous challenges that were often mitigated by queer community support.

Table 2. Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Latin American culture and family dynamics: Tradition and hostility contributing to distancing	- Pressure to conform to traditional, conservative gender roles and family rejection - Experiences of discrimination and violence - Distancing from Latin American culture and people
Migration as a catalyst for a sense of freedom, gender resocialisation, and quality of life	- Sense of freedom after moving to London - Gender resocialisation: An opportunity to explore and learn more about gender identities safely - Quality of life and access to healthcare
Intersectional challenges in London: Transphobia, xenophobia and psychological well-being	- Challenges in healthcare access and psychological well-being - Challenges in employment opportunities and psychological
Queer integrations: Support systems, activism, and the need for intersectional thinking	- Queer communities as support systems - Queer activism as a form of resistance - The need for intersectional thinking

Latin American culture and family dynamics: Tradition and hostility contributing to distancing
Pressure to conform to traditional, conservative gender roles and family rejection

All participants reported experiencing the Latin American context as traditional and conservative overall. In some of the interviews, these values were seen as tied with patriarchal and religious beliefs, establishing strict gender roles, including expectations of heterosexuality, cisgender identity, and a focus on marriage and procreation. Kai, for instance, was raised in “the most conservative group in the Catholic Church” in Caracas, Venezuela and was expected to marry a woman, which they did. Similarly, Ana got engaged to women on two occasions as she felt “pressured to marry a woman”. After calling off the last engagement, she came out as gay and left the country to escape these pressures:

I needed to live my life; otherwise, I [was going to] ruin someone else's life. And for me to do that, I needed to go away. I cannot do this here. [...] I have two choices in my head. I'm going to live being who I am or I will end up dead. (Ana, ella/she, Brazil)

For many participants, leaving their home countries was the only way to live authentically. It was a tool for survival, away from the normative pressures imposed by religion and traditional culture. Similarly, Sam came out as gay to their family after they married a man in London. Their mum did not want to discuss this topic openly, remarking: “It's a pity that you're not going to have children,” which was distressing for Sam.

These systems of oppression were usually expressed within their family units, particularly when participants did not fit in with these strict gender (and sexual) roles. For instance, families often protested when the participants in this study did not display attributes associated with macho culture or when they came out at various points of their lives as gay, bi, trans, or non-binary. For instance, Isabel, a woman from Bolivia, experienced many microaggressions from her seemingly supportive family. She felt as though she had to be more reserved around them out of respect for them and their religious background:

In Bolivia, I couldn't even put on eyeliner or lipstick out of respect for the family. Because they would say, “no, don't put that on”. I can't say my dad or mom didn't like it; they might have wanted me to look prettier. But you could see their look of suffering, wondering why their son was born a woman. My dad suffered a lot, but until the last moment, he always told me to respect the house while you're in the house, don't do anything inappropriate, and don't make the neighbourhood laugh at me. (Isabel, ella/she, Bolivia)

For many participants and their families, Latin America was generally perceived as a hostile environment to be trans and non-binary, even outside their family units, and consequently many experienced more overt forms of violence.

Experiences of discrimination and violence

Participants reported experiences of homophobia, transphobia, and even violence within Latin American contexts, which contributed to deep-seated feelings of anxiety and depression. Isabel, for example, reported experiencing verbal violence:

[As I was] returning to my house, a taxi stopped, and three guys got out. They said to me, “Oh, you're a faggot; we don't want you in this neighbourhood,” wanting to attack me. (Isabel, ella/she, Bolivia)

Similarly, many participants stated that these occurrences are not uncommon in Latin America. For instance, Carmen noted that one of the advantages of not being in Mexico is that she can wear outfits that align with her gender identity without fearing violence:

In Mexico [...] I'm afraid someone will yell at me, attack me[...] When you pass as a cisgender woman, you face less violence [...]. If I've decided to go out with a miniskirt and heels, at least someone won't kill me, like in Latin America [...] That's also a privilege. (Carmen, ella/she, Mexico)

Many participants described how not passing as a woman in these contexts can be dangerous, as they can be victims of transmisogyny (Serano, 2007) and violence. In this context, Dani also referred to the low life expectancy of trans people in Brazil when discussing “not wanting to become a statistic”. Other forms of structural transphobia and discrimination are worth mentioning. For instance, Isabel was an asylum seeker in London. She reflected on her experiences in Bolivia:

In Bolivia, when accepting the gender identity change, among the clauses of the social ministry of the government, it is written that as trans women, we cannot contribute to the government for our retirement. We are not considered people in society. We have no rights. [...] I am not considered a person. (Isabel, ella/she, Bolivia)

This was a dehumanising experience for Isabel, which further drove her, as well as other participants, to leave their home countries to seek new opportunities in seemingly ‘safer’ and ‘welcoming’ contexts.

Distancing from Latin American culture and people

All participants discussed their distancing from the Latin American community due to these experiences. This distance was physical, cultural, and social when migrating to London. Importantly, for many of them, this has meant distancing themselves from religion, as many saw this as a critical factor in their negative experiences in Latin America. Val, for instance, reflected on their rejection of religion, which they use in their art as a form of protest:

[My parents] go to church every weekend. So yeah, they have a positive attachment to religion. And I have the complete opposite. My [art] as well [is about] subverting the idea of religion and everything they do. (Val, any pronouns, Brazil)

Val uses religious symbols in their queer art as a form of protest, showing their physical and cultural distance from them. Many participants also mentioned that they distanced themselves from Latin American culture and religion to accept themselves as trans and/or non-binary. Ana described this process as a ‘deprogramming’, which enabled her to come to terms with her gender and sexuality, albeit slowly. Ana discussed how it still took her some years after moving to London to accept herself as a woman:

You can move. But all of the principles of the things you've been told, you've been programmed. It stays inside you. In a way, I was here, but I was still trapped in my own mind. [...] Even though I felt so free, [...] it took me over 10 years in London to let Ana come to life. (Ana, she/her, Brazil)

Ana’s account shows how, while participants attempted to leave Latin American culture and traditions behind, the ‘programming’ is challenging to overcome. Nonetheless, physical or cultural distancing gave all participants newfound freedom. This was crucial in enabling them to explore their gender identities and express themselves freely once they departed from the seemingly restrictive environments of their upbringing.

Migration as a catalyst for a sense of freedom, gender resocialisation, and quality of life

Sense of freedom after moving to London

According to all participants, migrating to London was a pivotal moment that offered a sense of freedom and an opportunity to explore and affirm their gender identities away from the norms of their home countries. Isabel, for example, explained how she did not feel free in Bolivia, as she could not be herself:

I left Bolivia because I didn’t feel free. There was always that taboo out of respect for my family. I couldn’t be as I am now. I’m not provocative; I’m very natural, not like other trans women who walk in high heels and sequins. I respect that, but I’m used to being more private and reserved. It was so much that I couldn’t even walk around with my hair down, always covered, even though I was independent. But out of respect for my mum and for my family. I finally said, “I’m dying here, I’m not happy. I have breasts, a body, everything, but I’m not happy. I have money, but I’m not happy.” (Isabel, ella/she, Bolivia)

In London, Isabel has been able to experiment with her appearance, dressing in a way that she feels more comfortable. Similarly, Sam mentioned that living in London has given them many freedoms. In particular, the freedom to reinvent themselves in a new place and to leave behind the stigma associated with being HIV-positive and queer:

There are many [benefits of living in London] – first, the freedom. I feel there's no weight. [...] You feel very free because you won't run into anyone you know [...]. If you start from scratch, then you can reinvent yourself [...]. In Colombia, the social past weighs a lot; I think that's why I got so liberated from HIV – from the stigma surrounding that. (Sam, elle/they, Colombia)

Sam alludes to the idea that this newfound freedom comes from not having a social past, something that is important in the Latin American context. As such, being away provides space to explore their gender and sexuality without this pressure, which may not have to be hidden in a more individualistic context such as London. For both Isabel and Sam, escaping the stigma associated with being HIV positive was also important, offering a newfound sense of freedom.

Gender resocialisation: An opportunity to explore and learn more about gender identities safely

For all participants, London also offered them the freedom to be themselves through safety. All participants described being able to dress in ways that felt more closely aligned with their gender. Val and Dani argued that London was safer than their cities in Brazil, for instance:

[London offers the] freedom to be yourself. For example, you don't have to worry that you'll go out on the street... It's not that nothing will ever happen. I'm not saying that. but going out on the street without worrying that someone will identify you as trans and will beat you up or do something to you just because they identified you as trans... is a *huge* relief. It's like taking a huge weight off your shoulders. (Dani, ela/she, Brazil)

This feeling of safety and freedom enabled individuals to freely explore and experiment with their gender and sexual identities without much fear of violent consequences. As a result, many people felt at ease expressing femininity or androgyny in both public and private settings, especially among fellow queer individuals like trans and non-binary people. This newfound freedom enabled individuals to participate in various queer-friendly environments, promoting personal development and self-expression related to their gender identities through gender resocialisation. For instance, Carmen mentioned that moving to California – and then London – helped her understand her identity and become a more creative person:

I feel as though I was re-born [...] I was always surrounded by creative people, so it was different. You could be whoever you wanted to be. (Carmen, ella/she, Mexico)

Kai, who also called moving to London their 'rebirth', discussed how moving to London provided them with a vocabulary to understand their experience with gender:

When I was growing up, I had this feeling that I was not a man and I was not a woman. [...] But I didn't know what to do with it. And I also didn't feel encouraged to explore it or express it. So I just kept it to myself. But when I come here, in the forms you have gender: male, female, other. [...] When I came out of as non-binary, it was like: of course! How come I didn't see it? [It] planted a seed of maybe what I'm feeling is not just me, maybe it's a thing... [...] Suddenly, it is a real thing that we can talk about. Yes, there is a word for it. I guess it validated my experience. (Kai, elle/they, Venezuela)

Many participants saw London as a place where identity exploration was possible and, in some cases, encouraged, providing them with a sense of freedom that was not afforded in their native countries in such an open manner.

Quality of life and access to healthcare

While living in London allowed participants to express their identities authentically, many also spoke about other advantages of living in London. Some advantages included general quality of life, financial growth, and access to healthcare. Dani, for instance, described the idea that in a place like London, she could achieve many of her goals aside from safety and gender expression:

You have the possibility to fulfil dreams, to realise desires, you know? To have a more peaceful experience of eating well, being well dressed, walking, and living. [...] There are countless advantages to being here. (Dani, ela/she, Brazil)

Sam also mentioned that moving to the UK has been quite positive regarding their health. Their GP made them change their HIV medicine because their Colombian antiretrovirals were no longer in use in the UK – so this was a significant update for them:

[The antiretroviral medicine] I was taking was really bad, and I had many side effects. When I got here, they told me these meds didn't even exist here; they were terrible, and I had to change them. [...] It causes nightmares and diarrhoea every day. And for years, I lived like that. (Sam, elle/they, Colombia)

Similarly, Isabel has been able to receive both HIV medicine and gender-affirming hormones in London. She described how some of her trans friends back in Bolivia died because they were taking over-the-counter birth control medicine since they were not prescribed gender-affirming hormones. She was taking this medicine before she came to London as well:

I now have regular checkups for HIV at [clinic...] Many friends there are killing themselves by injecting something not for our health to look pretty, but not everyone is lucky enough to get out. (Isabel, ella/she, Bolivia)

Nonetheless, many participants, including Isabel, experienced various disadvantages in navigating the UK's health system and access to employment opportunities. In London, participants faced significant intersectional challenges, including transphobia and xenophobia within these settings, imposing intersectional barriers that affected their mental health and financial stability.

Intersectional challenges in London: Transphobia, xenophobia and psychological well-being
Challenges in healthcare access and psychological well-being

Lack of fluency in the English language was a significant access barrier for some participants, especially those who recently moved to the UK. This was especially true for Isabel, who did not yet speak English. Isabel recalls the misunderstandings – and transphobia – she faced as a trans woman accessing essential services and medical care in the UK as an asylum seeker:

I [...] experienced [...] rejection and transphobia here in London. [The Home Office] referred me to a clinic for a general check-up. The doctor asked me to undress. It was a gynaecology check-up. I asked why [I was having this checkup]. I didn't want to undress, and she insisted. I am a trans woman, but still, she insisted. What word could I use to make her understand "I'm trans, I don't have a vagina". When she saw the penis, she said, "Why didn't you tell me?" She told me to get dressed and kicked me out. (Isabel, ella/she, Bolivia)

Isabel described how these misunderstandings made her life in London more difficult as she navigated an already complicated health system. Carmen has also had terrible experiences in accessing gender-affirming services. She has gone private in her care, meaning she has had to pay for things out of pocket. She was able to pay for her transition via 'shared care', which means she has paid for her hormones privately while the NHS covers some of the cost. At the time of the interview, Carmen was struggling to pay for her hormones and had not taken them for two weeks:

[The medical system in the UK for trans people] is extremely difficult, humiliating, and dehumanising. It's stupid! I pay so many taxes and don't have the most basic or essential things. Everyone thinks London is a first-world city, but it's not. [...] From the time I told [the gender clinic], I was trans until that date I got my prescription, I get called Mr It's a bit humiliating because [...] I have breasts... I told my GP that I am a trans person and that I don't want to be called Mr And they said: "We can't do anything". (Carmen, ella/she, Mexico)

These systemic barriers, as well as the transphobia she experienced in these settings (in the form of misgendering), contributed to Carmen's depression and panic attacks. Carmen also added that these negative experiences may be due to xenophobia:

Especially when you're an immigrant... I don't know if this also happens to people here, but I think it does. [...] It's unbelievable that I told [my GP] that I basically wanted to kill myself, and all they tell you to do is call a number [to access services] and wait three months. It's a joke! [...] I had panic attacks. That also happened when I moved here. I started having panic attacks, and that was not nice. So, after about a year, I had to go into private therapy. (Carmen, ella/she, Mexico)

These experiences highlight the various systems of oppression (transphobia and xenophobia) that trans and non-binary people experience in accessing health services.

Challenges in employment opportunities and psychological well-being

Participants like Ana and Carmen experienced various difficulties finding employment as they transitioned. For instance, Ana described how difficult it was for her to find jobs when she did not yet pass as a woman:

The main challenge I had here was when I started my transition. Getting a job was very difficult. People never said anything to my face, but you can sense why they do not hire you. [...] Then I had my first surgery. I had my boobs done and had no body hair. So I started to [send applications] and this one took me. It was really nice. I felt so happy. (Ana, ella/she, Brazil)

Similarly, Carmen started working as a designer in London after she completed her degree. She considered being trans a disadvantage for this position, so she did not disclose her trans history when she applied for the job:

I remember saying to myself the day of the interview: "Don't let them know you're trans" because I was afraid. I cosplayed as this gay male designer, and obviously, I got the job [...] I

know that gay men have a huge advantage for being men, for being gay: top of the list.
(Carmen, ella/she, Mexico)

However, a colleague discovered her social media and exposed her, leading to her facing microaggressions at work. She connected these experiences to the different forms of oppression she encountered as a woman, a trans individual, and a Latin American.

According to them, they respected my identity, but it was a bit hypocritical. Because you're in a British context and, on top of that, white, privileged, cisgender, British. So, it bothers them to see a Latina making decisions, which is something I've always noticed. They don't say it openly, but it's like they're not taking you seriously. [...] It's very telling how the glass ceiling, white privilege, and all these [systems of oppression] operate. It's as if they were whipping me with white privilege, nepotism, the patriarchy, all of it... I had to resign. But when you're trans, that's how life goes. (Carmen, ella/she, Mexico)

Being trans and Latin American was, therefore, seen as a disadvantage in the workplace by some participants because they experienced more than one system of oppression. Similarly, Kai experienced overt xenophobia in the workplace, which contributed to their mental health issues:

[My boss] said, "Oh, I wish we had more British people here." And he basically found a way to fire this Indian software engineer. He was very [...] xenophobic. He would comment on my accent all the time, which was infuriating. He was a horrible boss. He was the reason I left [tech company...] It was a big contributing factor to one of my depression. [...] I was trying to work really hard to earn his trust and his approval despite him being xenophobic. So it was very unhealthy. (Kai, elle/they, Venezuela)

Most participants, therefore, experienced various intersectional challenges in London regarding health and workplace settings. These experiences were often moderated by their language proficiency, education, and overall social capital. However, a combination of xenophobia and transphobia was experienced by most participants in various forms. These overlapping systems of oppression adversely affected the mental health, financial stability, and overall psychological well-being of these participants, demonstrating the complex barriers faced by trans and non-binary immigrants in accessing essential services and employment opportunities.

Queer integrations: Support systems, activism, and the need for intersectional thinking

Queer communities as support systems

Despite these obstacles, many participants actively engaged with the queer community in London, including organisations, charities, and nightlife. These spaces provided them with information, resources, and networks that helped them build a sense of belonging and develop a queer identity outside the cultural contexts of their home countries.

For many, these spaces served as a form of community resilience (Meyer, 2015), enabling them to cope with the various forms of oppression they faced. Kai, for example, is heavily involved in the queer community in London, as they volunteer for a queer charity and are involved in queer-affirmative spiritual practices, which have allowed them to reconcile their faith and queer identity:

The queer community is so nice. The people at [queer charity are] all lovely people. Every now and then, I go to this queer rave called [x]. It's wonderful. It's a very safe space. Everybody dresses up the way they want. Everybody's very friendly. It's easy to make friends. So I think the queer community is part [of my identity] (Kai, elle/they, Venezuela)

Similarly, Val is very involved with the queer community in London, which has been pivotal to them in exploring their gender and sexual identities and expressions:

I'm very connected with queer culture – many facets of queer culture in London, like in the kinky scene, the performance scene, being queer scene, the healthcare queer scene... and that's where I thrive... and that's why I like being here because I have the chance of being in these spaces and create something and find out more about myself in these spaces. (Val, any pronouns, Brazil).

This was also an experience Ana shared. She began to explore her identity by going to gay clubs in London for the first time, an experience that was life-changing for her as she had never inhabited these spaces. She felt free to explore her sexuality and, later, her gender:

I didn't have a gay life [in Brazil]. I had that experience of being gay here. [...] Gradually, I was letting myself go, like not feeling guilty or thinking about all of that church stuff. [...] I started

to realise and to read; I started to look at a lot of videos on YouTube and read. I was asking people much information about [trans] stuff. (Ana, ela/she, Brazil)

Ana started exploring gender identity on her own terms, asking trans women she met in these queer spaces how they transitioned. She researched gender outside of the confines of religion. This freedom gave Ana the ammunition to come out as a woman despite feeling she would disappoint her family. Involvement in London's queer communities provided vital support for individuals navigating life in a foreign land while affirming their identities. These spaces allowed participants to express themselves freely and find the necessary tools, networks, and emotional support to thrive.

Queer activism as a form of resistance

Similarly, queer activism served as a powerful form of resistance for many participants, providing a vital platform to engage with and support their communities while resisting the systemic oppression they faced. Ana, for instance, was very passionate about volunteering:

I was working for [queer charity...] I am more in contact with the LGBT, which I love. You know, I really understand the work they do, and I have passion. But before then, I never really thought about it actually. (Ana, ela/she, Brazil)

Similarly, Sam is still very active in Colombia, fighting for the recognition of trans and non-binary people there. In the UK, they have worked as an HIV advocate, which has been very positive for them. They see this work as affirming their experiences and identities:

The people who work in activism here from the Latin, queer, and HIV perspective recognise me as a non-binary person. [...] It's very affirming as a non-binary person. (Sam, elle/they, Colombia)

We argue that this activism was a form of community resilience (Meyer, 2015) that enabled participants to counter the negative effects of oppression and discrimination. By engaging in activism, they are fighting for change and cultivating environments where they – and others like them – can truly belong, drawing primarily from their queer identities and often at the cost of their Latin American identities.

The need for intersectional thinking

Nonetheless, many of them wished that there were specific services for trans and non-binary Latin Americans in London. For instance, Sam discussed the lack of intersectional thinking when examining the experience of these populations in the UK, as they do not feel represented. Sam felt this intersection was often ignored:

[Transness and Latin identities] don't often intersect – there are Latino events, and someone talks about being Latinx, but that's it. [...] It's difficult to see [events dedicated to] the intersection of different identities. (Sam, elle/they, Colombia)

Sam also argued that one of the main reasons this is not discussed is that non-binary issues are often whitewashed and framed through the lens of colonialism and whiteness:

It's also a process of colonisation. They tell me to speak in English about that [...] Generally, the discussion about being non-binary is also very white. Are these discussions for white, English people only? Who has the privilege of expressing their identity? And who has the power to do it? And the possibility of doing it? (Sam, elle/they, Colombia)

Isabel also hopes that there will be more services in the future for Latin American trans women, as she felt as though most of the charities are primarily concerned with helping gay men:

There is a lack of support for trans women. We need to fight, unite, and gain equal support for all: the gay community, trans, and lesbians. There is too much division and more support for gay men and less for trans people. We ask for support from society but don't support each other. (Isabel, ella/she, Bolivia)

Like Sam and Isabel, many participants felt that their experiences and identities as trans and non-binary and Latin American were often overlooked or inadequately represented in broader queer spaces, which tend to cater primarily to gay, white, English-speaking individuals. There is a clear need for more inclusive and intersectional approaches within queer support systems in the UK. By better integrating Latin American identities and experiences, these communities could become more visible and empowered, fostering a more comprehensive support network that acknowledges and addresses the diverse needs of all its members.

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of trans and non-binary Latin American migrants in London, analysing the intersection of migration, gender identity, and psychological well-being using intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003). These theoretical frameworks were crucial in revealing how the intersection of migration, gender identity, and cultural factors shape the lived experiences of these migrants. Latin American culture and family dynamics played a significant role in shaping the participants' experiences. They faced intense pressure to conform to traditional gender roles within their conservative, often religious families, leading to feelings of entrapment and emotional distress that led many of them to migrate. Upon migrating, participants encountered a newfound sense of freedom and safety in London, allowing them to explore and affirm their gender identities more openly. The city's relative safety afforded them with opportunities to express their gender identities in ways that were not possible in their home countries. However, participants also encountered many challenges, particularly in accessing healthcare and employment, which were often a reflection of systemic forms of discrimination and oppression, such as transphobia and xenophobia. Most participants described integrating into London's queer culture, community, and support services rather than Latin American ones. These queer community integrations offered a vital form of support and, we argue, a source of community resilience (Meyer, 2015) in the face of oppression. However, many participants expressed a need for more inclusive approaches that incorporated their Latin American identities into these queer support services and communities. These findings emphasise the need for culturally competent and inclusive support systems for trans and non-binary Latin American migrants.

Queer migration theorists, such as Carrillo (2004) and Weston (1995), have long argued that queer individuals migrate for reasons deeply intertwined with their sexual and gender identities beyond mere economic or familial motivations. This study's findings align with these insights, demonstrating that trans and non-binary Latin Americans are often driven to migrate to escape the machismo, dominant Catholic ideologies, and heteronormative social environments prevalent in their home countries. These oppressive contexts, which are frequently marked by systemic violence and discrimination (Hernández Galván, 2019), push queer individuals to seek refuge in cities like London, where they can more freely explore and affirm their identities. Furthermore, migration to London gave participants a sense of freedom that was pivotal in exploring and affirming their gender identities. This newfound freedom was often coupled with a sense of safety, as participants felt more secure in expressing their gender identities without fear of overt violence or discrimination. This theme resonates with Carrillo's (2004) concept of 'sexual migration,' where migration serves as a critical juncture for identity exploration and transformation. The participants' experiences of gender resocialisation (Valenzuela, 2021) in London, where they were exposed to diverse queer-positive spaces and information, facilitated their understanding of their gender and allowed them to embrace their identities fully. This gender resocialisation process was essential in helping participants redefine themselves outside the rigid frameworks of their cultural backgrounds, ultimately leading to a more authentic expression of their gender and sexuality. This study shares similarities with Valenzuela's (2021) findings on Latin American gay men, as our participants pointed out that their queer identities superseded their Latin American identities as "queer first; Latine second".

It is important to note that migration narratives often oversimplify and dichotomise acceptance, portraying Latin America as uniformly homophobic, transphobic, and regressive while idealising places like the UK and the US as inherently tolerant and progressive. This discourse, known as homonationalism (Puar, 2007), ignores the significant progress Latin America has made in expanding legal rights for queer individuals, including the recognition of same-sex marriage, gender identity laws, and anti-discrimination protections (Corrales, 2015). Homophobia and transphobia, while present in Latin America, vary in intensity and are not uniformly experienced across all regions. Similarly, these oppressive systems also exist within the UK, contributing to vulnerabilities among trans and non-binary individuals, including exposure to violence, economic instability, and mental health challenges (Ellis et al., 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge these global power relations through an intersectional and decolonial lens, avoiding simplistic binaries of 'good' versus 'evil' between the UK and Latin America (Lee, 2018).

As such, their experiences of migration were also fraught with challenges, as we have demonstrated, including navigating new cultural contexts, language barriers, and the persistence of xenophobia and transphobia, even in seemingly progressive cities like London. Participants often encountered significant barriers to accessing healthcare, employment, and social integration, exacerbated by their immigrant status and, for many, lack of fluency in English. These findings align with the work of Bränström et al. (2016) and Hunter et al. (2021), who have shown that gender minority stress (Meyer, 2003), compounded by intersectional forms of oppression such as transphobia and xenophobia, contributes to adverse mental health outcomes such as anxiety and depression, which many participants discussed struggling with as a result of these negative experiences (Balsam et al., 2011). The challenges faced by participants in accessing healthcare are particularly concerning. As noted by Davies et al. (2009), migration significantly influences health as a social determinant, impacting migrants' social status and access to resources. Participants in this study reported experiences of transphobia and xenophobia within the UK's healthcare system, mirroring findings by Gailits et al. (2022) regarding the compounded oppressions faced by Latin American trans women in Canada. These systemic barriers not only hinder access to essential health services but also exacerbate feelings of alienation and distress among trans and non-binary migrants. These findings also align with the research of Gowin et al. (2017), showing that many participants still faced similar challenges in the UK as they did in their home countries, which were exacerbated by limited healthcare access, contributing to their poor mental health outcomes.

In the workplace, participants experienced similar intersectional challenges. The struggle to find employment that aligns with their skills and qualifications (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2019) is further complicated by the intersection of transphobia and xenophobia. Participants reported being discriminated against based on both their gender identity and their status as Latin American migrants, which aligns with Kawashima's (2021) findings on the impact of language barriers and non-recognition of qualifications on migrants' social participation and well-being. Additionally, all women in this study also struggled with the compounding effects of transphobia and misogyny (or transmisogyny, Serano, 2007), further complicating their access to jobs and having negative repercussions on their psychological well-being.

Participants sought support from queer communities, where they found a sense of belonging and, as we argue, community resilience (Meyer, 2015) in the face of oppression. For the participants in this study, these queer-affirming spaces offered emotional and social support, which enabled gender resocialisation to be processed via identity explorations that empowered them to assert their identities. These findings align with previous research by Valenzuela (2021), who documented the importance of queer spaces in providing a sense of belonging and facilitating the gender and sexual resocialisation of Latin American gay men in London.

Implications for policy and practice

The study's findings have significant implications for policymakers, service providers, and activists working with queer migrants in the UK. There is a need for targeted research on the experiences of trans and non-binary migrants, with a focus on those from Latin America. Service providers require training in cultural competence and the specific challenges faced by these migrants. Activists should work on building intersectional networks and advocating for the rights of trans and non-binary migrants.

Strengths and limitations

To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies that specifically addressed the experiences of trans and non-binary individuals in the UK. This study uses semi-structured interviews, walking interviews, and TA to understand participants' voices and subjective experiences. However, we also must highlight this investigation's limitations. Firstly, due to difficulties in recruitment, some Latin American countries, such as Argentina and Ecuador, were not represented in this study. We also acknowledge that we could not recruit any men or masculine-of-centre participants. Future studies should try to encourage participation from these populations, as this study could not capture their unique experiences.

Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of queer migration studies by shedding light on the experiences of trans and non-binary Latin American migrants in London. It underscores the importance of an intersectional approach to migration studies, recognising the complex interplay of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and migration status in shaping the lives of these individuals. As the Latin American population in the UK continues to grow, researchers, policymakers, and service providers must pay closer attention to the unique challenges and opportunities faced by trans and non-binary migrants, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are met.

Disclosure statement

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare. The third author contributed to this article as an independent researcher.

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