Microaggressions and Microaffirmations: LGBTI+'s Experiences, Perceptions, and Expectations of Bystanders' Reactions

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ABSTRACT

Microaggressions are subtle and indiscernible discriminatory remarks or actions that may marginalise the LGBTI+ community and is directed toward their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. They contribute to the dissemination of stereotypes and have cumulative effects adverse effects on sexual minorities. Microaffirmations on the other hand are small acts or expressions of understanding, care, and support, that counteract the negative impact of microaggressions. Bystanders can either contribute to the perpetration or the interruption of microaggressions and offer microaffirmations to the target. There is a lack of research into such experiences in the northern part of Cyprus. The current study sought to explore microaggression and microaffirmation experiences of LGBTI+s residing in Northern Cyprus, including their reactions and the emotional outcomes, and their expectations from bystanders in response to microaggressions. Within the framework of a qualitative design, semi structured interviews were carried out, transcribed, then analysed using a thematic content analysis while employing a deductive and inductive approach to confirm pre-existing themes and to discover potential new ones. The analysis revealed eight microaggression themes and seven microaffirmation themes apparent in the experiences of LGBTI+s. The experiences reported were similar to those experienced by LGBTI+s in other contexts. Whereas microaggressions were associated with negative emotional outcomes, microaffirmations were linked to positive emotional outcomes. Moreover, there was an expectation for bystanders to respond to microaggressions in several ways including the prompt warning and education of aggressors. Implications are made for

bystander interventions to combat discrimination and to establish safe spaces in social, institutional, and interpersonal settings.

Keywords: Microaggressions, Microaffirmations, Expectations from Bystanders

ÖZ

Mikrosaldırganlıklar, LGBTI+ bireyleri cinsel yönelim veya cinsiyet kimliğine dayalı olarak marjinalleştirebilen örtük, hemen göze çarpmayan ve ayrımcı söz veya eylemlerdir. Bu söz ve eylemler cinsel azınlıkları etkileyen stereotiplerin yayılmasına katkıda bulunabilmektedir. Mikroolumlamamalar ise LGBTI+ bireylerin cinsiyet yönelim ya da kimliğine yönelik ilgi, destek ve anlayışı simgeleyen söz ve eylemlerdir. Tanık olan kişiler ise hedef olan kişiye yönelik herhangi bir saldırının devam etmesine aracılık edebilir veya mikro saldırganca eylemleri durdurarak hedef olan kişiye mikro olumlayıcı davranabilir. Kıbrıs'ın kuzeyinde ise bu tür deneyimler hakkında çok az araştırma yapılmıştır. Bu bağlamda araştırmanın amacı Kuzey Kıbrıs'ta yaşayan LGBTI+ bireylerin mikrosaldırganlık ve mikroolumlama deneyimlerini, mikro saldırganlıklara karşı verdikleri tepkileri ve duygusal etkileri ile tanıklardan beklentilerini derinlemesine incelemektir. Nitel bir çalışma çerçevesinde yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir ve ardından tümdengelim (*deductive*) ve tümevarım (*inductive*) bir yaklaşım kullanılmıştır. Tematik içerik analizi sonuçları, geçmiş araştırma bulgularını desteklemekle birlikte yeni temaların keşfedilmesine olanak sağlamıştır. Paylaşılan deneyimlerde sekiz mikro saldırganlık ve yedi mikro olumlama teması elde edilmiştir. Elde edilen bu deneyimlerin, farklı kültürel bağlamlarda yaşayan LGBTI+ bireylerin yaşadıkları deneyimlerle benzerlik gösterdiği anlaşılmıştır. Mikro saldırganlıklar olumsuz ve mikro olumlamalar ise olumlu duygusal sonuçlarla bir arada ifade edilmiştir. Ayrıca, tanıklardan mikro saldırganlık anında çeşitli biçimlerde tepki vermeleri beklenmekte ve en başta saldırganın o anda uyarılıp konuyla ilgili aydınlatılarak kişide farkındalık geliştirilmesinin beklenildiği görülmüştür. Sonuçlar, ayrımcılığın önlemesi ve sosyal,

kurumsal ve kişiler arası ortamlarda güvenli alanlar yaratılması ve tanık müdahalelerinin yaygınlaştırılması açısından önemli bilgiler sunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mikro Saldırganlıklar, Mikro Olumlamalar, Tanıklardan Beklentiler

DEDICATION

To my mother, father, sister, and the resilient LGBTI+ community in Cyprus

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Prejudice and discrimination have recently taken more egalitarian forms, which manifest in subtle and indiscernible ways. One such example is the prevalence of microaggressions. This phenomenon has only recently been studied by scholars; hence, no such research exists in the context of north Cyprus. The goal of this research is to attain a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon to serve as a guide in the designing of interventions aimed at tackling and preventing microaggressions. Moreover, the study aims to understand the impact of microaffirmations in response to microaggressions, LGBTI+s reactions to microaggressions, the emotional outcomes, and their expectations from bystanders during such experiences. Given that the main objective of this study is to understand microaggressions and microaffirmations directed toward sexual orientation and/or gender identity, it is worthwhile to begin by outlining some of the fundamental concepts.

1.1 Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Sexual orientation refers to emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction toward men, women, or both. This attraction is enduring and ranges along a spectrum, from exclusive attraction to the ‘other’ gender (heterosexuality) to exclusive attraction to the same gender (homosexuality). Men who are attracted to other men are often referred to as gay, while women who are attracted to other women are referred to as lesbian or gay. An attraction to both sexes and/or genders is referred to as

bisexuality. There are several other categories under the sexual orientation umbrella, including pansexuality (attraction to people regardless of gender or gender assigned at birth), asexuality (lack of sexual attraction), and demisexuality (attraction to those with a strong emotional bond) (American Psychological Association, 2008).

As for gender identity, the quintessential difference between sex and gender is that sex is assigned at birth and is associated with biological attributes such as anatomy, hormones, and chromosomes. Whereas gender is socially constructed and refers to the roles or behaviours generally considered as appropriate for boys and girls or men and women. Gender identity, on the other hand, is the psychological sense of being male, female, neither, or both, while gender expression refers to the manner in which gender identity is communicated through mannerisms, clothing, or hairstyles (Fausto-Sterling, 2019). The term transgender encompasses those whose gender identity and expression do not align with the gender they were assigned at birth, though it is important to note that not all those whose gender identity/expression do not align identify as transgender. The term non-binary may fall under the transgender umbrella, or it may be considered as a discrete but related gender identity. Those who are non-binary also do not fit into the binary gender categorization (male and female). Based on these definitions, the term LGBTI+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex, while the plus sign encompasses those who identify as non-binary, asexual, pansexual, etc., (APA, 2008).

Intersex is the term used for individuals who have atypical development of sex characteristics, (e.g., chromosomes, hormones, reproductive organs, and genitalia) that do not correspond with binary categories of male and female (Köhler et al., 2012). An estimated 1.7% of the population have intersex variations, while a

reported 0.1% to 0.2% undergo “corrective’ surgery to match with either one of the genders within the binary (Blackless et al., 2000).

Sexual orientation is disparate from gender identity, in the sense that it is expressed through behaviours such as handholding or kissing and it is highly related to intimate personal relationships which fulfil fundamental needs for love, attachment, and commitment (APA, 2008).

Prejudice, false beliefs, and stereotypes about LGBTI+ contribute significantly to disparities experienced in medical, academic, and professional domains and at the same time have been found to be linked to higher mental health issues for gender and sexual minorities (Hoffman et al., 2016; Lloyd et al., 2020; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Plante et al., 2013; Eaton e al., 2020; Harwood et al., 2012; Poolokasingham et al., 2014). The next section will cover the link between prejudice directed at the LGBTI+ community and its negative consequences.

1.2 Sexual Prejudice

Generally, prejudice has been described as a negative emotional response, characterized by distaste, hostility, and aversion felt toward an individual or group, that is based on shallow and false beliefs or stereotypes which are impervious to change, despite evidence on the contrary (Fiske, 1998). This phenomenon is not merely a result of ignorance or misinformation, but it is a complex process that is dictated by personality characteristics, as well as societal and cultural norms (Brown, 2011).

Sexual prejudice on the other hand derives from the same source and refers to the negative attitudes held toward sexual minorities, or LGBTI + (Dovidio & Gaertner,

2010; Herek & McLemore, 2013). Heterosexism, often used synonymously with sexual prejudice, is a set of assumptions and ideologies which posit heterosexuality as the norm and as superior to other sexual orientations (Herek, 1992). Inherent in heterosexism is the belief that heterosexual desires, identities, and relationships are more legitimate and socially acceptable than others, and is expressed through social customs established upon heterosexuality, operating at the societal and institutional level (Clarke, 2012; Herek, 2000, Herek & McLemore, 2013).

At the individual level, homophobia, first described as an irrational fear toward LGBTI+, refers to the personal belief system rooted in prejudice, stereotyping, and misinformation which manifests in the form of bigoted and hateful attitudes and behaviour toward those who are romantically or sexually interested in the same gender (Weinberg, 1972; Herek, 2000, Herek & McLemore; 2013; Fraïssé & Barrientos, 2016). Similarly, transphobia reflects an unwarranted aversion, disgust, and hatred for those who identify as transgender or those who are gender non-conforming, such as, masculine women, feminine men, and/or cross-dressers (Hill & Willoughby, 2005; McLean, 2021). Prejudice toward trans individuals is based on gender identity and expression and involves the rejection and/or a lack of understanding of their gender identity (Blair & Hoskin, 2008; McLean, 2021). One example of this is referring to a trans individual by their ‘deadname’, the name given to them at birth, rather than their chosen name (Sinclair-Palm & Chokly, 2022). At the structural level, certain institutional policies, cultural norms, and other societal-level conditions restrict the opportunities, resources, and overall well-being of minorities, or the stigmatized (Meyer, 2003; Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014). One

example of this is the ban on same-sex marriages in certain places around the world (Mos, 2020).

When we turn to the prevalence of LGBTI+ prejudice, research findings show that across the globe, LGBTI+ are most likely to experience prejudice and discrimination due to the gender and/or sexual identity. For instance, between 2016 and 2017, many sexual minorities reported having been physically or sexually assaulted or threatened with violence based on their LGBTI+ status. This number was 55% for Belgium, with 187 officially recorded cases; 20% for Spain, with 230 recorded cases; 39% for Lithuania, with 4 recorded cases; 62% for Poland, with 874 recorded cases; 19% for Italy, with 38 recorded cases; and 25% for Greece, with 41 officially declared cases (Godzisz & Viggiani, 2018). For young LGBTI+ this may include bullying victimization in the form of teasing, social exclusion, threats of and actual physical assaults based on perceived or actual sexual orientation (Basile et al., 2009). Past research consistently indicates that sexual minorities are more at risk to be the victims of bullying victimization than their heterosexual counterparts (Kosciw et al. 2012; Russell et al. 2014). In addition, students and adults frequently fail to confront homophobic behaviour in schools (Kosciw et al., 2012). Relatedly, the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) on lesbian, gay, and bisexual students showed that LGB students reported having experienced physical bullying in schools twice as much as their heterosexual peers (33 vs. 17%), as well as reporting a higher likelihood of receiving threats and bodily harm through a weapon at school. As such, compared to their heterosexual counterparts, LGB students were more likely to avoid school due to feeling unsafe. According to Kahle (2017), in addition to an increased likelihood of LGBQ students experiencing bullying at a higher rate than their

heterosexual peers, there was an intersectionality of sexual orientation and gender, where LGBQ female and male students, as well as heterosexual females reported more bullying victimization experiences compared to heterosexual males. Furthermore, in the 2017 report by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educational Network (GLSEN), it was shown that a majority of LGBTI+ students (70%) were subject to verbal harassment at school, while some reported being physically harassed based on their sexual orientation (28%). In line with this, due to their gender expression, 59% of LGBTI+ students reported having experienced verbal harassment, while 24% reported experiences with physical harassment at school (GLSEN, 2017). Such instances of harassment may have implications for self-harm, suicidal ideation, and attempt, which are often amplified by bullying and cyberbullying (Jadva et al., 2021). Similarly, Roberts et al. (2010), found that those who identified as lesbian, gay, and bisexual, and those who identified as heterosexual, but had same-sex partners, were at a higher risk of exposure to various violent and traumatic experiences compared to those who solely identified as heterosexual. The differences in risk of exposure were most pronounced for interpersonal violence and childhood maltreatment (Roberts et al., 2010).

One of the most extreme forms of prejudice is hate crime. Hate crimes are a spectrum of hostilities ranging from verbal abuse, discrimination, hate speech, microaggressions to criminal acts of violence, and are outright demonstrations of hatred, typically defined by the perpetrators' motivation to offend based on their bias toward a protected characteristic of the target, such as their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc., (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), 2009).

Instances of hate crimes may involve physical assault, vandalism, bullying, and hate speech. The severity and form of hate crimes may vary; however, research shows that most sexual minorities have had at least one experience with hate crime in their lifetime (Herek, 2009).

Examining the definitions in the literature reveals that sexual prejudice can manifest in various behavioural forms. The content of the experienced events are conceptualised differently in various subfields of psychology depending on contextual factors. Examples of such concepts include bullying and hate crime incidents. However, since these phenomena extend beyond the scope of this study, it is sufficient to note that such experiences are distinct from microaggression incidents. One crucial distinction is that microaggressions are more subtle and indirect forms of expressing discriminatory attitudes (Sue, 2010), while homophobic bullying and hate crimes are overt and intentional statements or actions that are more easily recognisable (Godzisz & Viggiani, 2018).

1.3 Consequences of Prejudice and Minority Stress

Sexual orientation and gender identity-based discrimination contributes to the disparities in psychological wellbeing experienced by LGBTI+ (Borgogna et al., 2019; Bostwick et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2020; McCabe, 2013; Ryan et al., 2009; Sarno et al., 2021). In line with the findings of disproportion in the psychological wellbeing of the LGBTI+ community, Meyer (2003) proposed that this was due to the stress associated with the minority status. Hence, in addition to ordinary and universal stress caused by life events, LGBTI+ individuals face particular and chronic experiences of stress stemming from their stigmatized status in society, such as prejudice, discrimination, and/or victimization, this is called minority stress.

According to the model, (1) minority stress is unique, and exorbitant to the ordinary stressors experienced by non-stigmatized people; (2) it is chronic, as the prejudice and discrimination stems from somewhat stable underlying social and cultural structures; and (3) it is socially based, hence, rooted in social processes, institutions, and structures beyond the individual level.

The minority stress model postulates distal and proximal stressors where the former may be chronic or acute, and involves prejudiced hate speech, violence, and/or institutionalised discrimination targeting the LGBTI+ as reflected in policies and laws made by the government. The latter on the other hand encompasses internal processes unique to gender minorities, such as internalized homophobia, rejection anticipation, and concealment of the self, as well as daily encounters with discrimination in the form of microaggressions - small acts of invalidation or disrespect (Nadal et al., 2011a; Platt & Lenzen, 2013; Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010). The model posits that minority stress is endured along a continuum, whereby distal stressors, such as discrimination and hate crime, consolidate sexual minorities' anticipation of discrimination and/or rejection, and the resulting vigilance when having social interactions, which leads to the internalization of negative attitudes encountered in society, regarded as internalised homophobia (Meyer, 2003; Sarno et al., 2021). However, the appraisal of negative messages is dependent on the individual characteristics of sexual minorities, such as their sense of identity, thus internalisation of such attitudes may be impactful in different ways (Meyer, 2003). For instance, some may conceal their sexual identity or orientation which is another factor known to contribute to internalised homophobia (Binion & Gray, 2020; Pachankis et al., 2020). In fact, research shows that at the individual level, proximal

stressors, (e.g., internalized homophobia, and concealment of identity), are rooted in distal stressors, such as institutional stigma (Pachankis, 2007). For instance, sexual minority men from countries with high institutional stigma were highly inclined to conceal their orientation compared to countries with lower stigma against sexual minorities (Pachankis et al., 2015).

Research shows that stigma-related stress leads to an increase in emotion dysregulation, social/interpersonal problems, and cognitive processes conferring risk for psychopathology (Sarno et al., 2021). LGBTI+ individuals endure more mental health issues, such as substance use disorders, affective disorders, and suicidal ideation and attempt (Borgogna et al., 2019; Bostwick et al., 2010; McCabe, 2013) compared to heterosexuals.

In a study utilizing data from the 2015 Global Drug Survey, in which participants were mainly from nine different countries (e.g., Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and United States of America), researchers have concluded that sexual minorities reported higher substance use compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Demant et al., 2017). Furthermore, a longitudinal study by Liu et al. (2020), showed that, despite a general decline in suicidal ideation among youth, disparities persist as LGBTI+ youth report higher rates of suicidal ideation compared to their heterosexual peers. Similarly, Ryan and colleagues (2009) found that compared to those who hadn't experienced parental rejection during adolescence, lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults who had, were more prone to depression and to have made a suicide attempt in their lifetime. Furthermore, young sexual minority people experience as much or more

minority stressors as did their older peers and suffer related psychological wellbeing outcomes (Meyer et al., 2021).

Negative psychological outcomes are not confined with interpersonal experiences but also institutionalized heterosexism too. For instance, in Hatzenbuehler and colleagues' study, they found that after same-sex marriage bans were passed in certain states the US, lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults who lived in those states experienced an increase in mood disorders, alcohol abuse, and generalized anxiety disorders (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010). By contrast, the abolishment of the same-sex marriage ban in Massachusetts in 2003, seemingly served to ameliorate the adverse effects of institutionalised prejudice (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2012). Another example for the negative impact of structural prejudice, for example, demonstrates that in states with protective policies in place against sexual orientation based discrimination, disparities in the prevalence of dysthymia, a mood disorder, were eliminated; in contrast, adults who identified as LGBT and resided in states without protective policies had a nearly 2.5-fold greater likelihood of developing dysthymia compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009).

Over the years, with an increase in laws against homophobic hate crimes, and discriminatory behaviour (Rostosky et al., 2009), and an increased societal emphasis on egalitarian norms (Herek, 2000), the manifestation of prejudice and discrimination has taken the form of more indirect and seemingly innocuous actions. One such form in which prejudice emerges are microaggressions.

1.4 Microaggressions

First conceptualized by Pierce and colleagues (Pierce et al., 1977), microaggressions refer to the subtle and covert exchanges with people of colour that are essentially 'put downs' or insults (verbal or non-verbal), that occur automatically and often unintentionally (Pierce et al., 1977; Solorzano et al., 2000). Racial microaggressions tend to be ambiguous and hard to detect as they commonly emerge in situations where perpetrators can offer a rationale for their prejudiced behaviour, and thus, an act of microaggression may reflect underlying implicit racial bias and adherence to stereotypes associated with people of colour (Sue et al., 2007).

Much like racial minorities, LGBTI+ individuals are also subject to microaggressions in the form of microinvalidations, microinsults and microassaults, solely based on their sexual orientation (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, etc.) and/or gender identity (Female, Male, Trans, Non-Binary, etc.) (Nadal et al., 2011a; Nadal et al. 2011b; Sterzing & Gartner, 2018; Sue et al., 2007; Woodford et al., 2015). Microassaults involve conscious and intentional acts that serve to degrade sexual minorities by bullying, threatening, name-calling, and/or social exclusion (Sue et al., 2007). Conversely, microinsults tend to occur unconsciously or automatically and are verbal or non-verbal messages communicating intolerance and insensitivity, while denigrating sexual minorities' identity and background (Sue et al., 2007). Likewise, microinvalidations are, often unintentional, statements, questions, or jokes that serve to negate or invalidate the lifestyles, thoughts, and emotions of sexual minorities, and promote the dissemination of negative stereotypes about them (Nadal et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2007).

1.4.1 Microaggression Themes

Microaggressions are a nascent field of study in social and psychological research, originating around 15 years ago. Although limited in number, studies conducted in the US have identified several themes apparent in LGBTI+s experiences with microaggressions, which involve an amalgamation of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Sue (2010) concluded that seven themes were apparent in the sexual orientation microaggression literature (see table 1). Through a thematic content analysis, five of these themes were confirmed (namely, homophobia as discomfort/disapproval of LGBT experience, heterosexist language/terminology as use of heterosexist and transphobic language, heteronormative culture and behaviour as endorsement of heteronormative culture, abnormality as assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality, and denial of heterosexism as denial of heterosexism/homophobia) by Nadal et al. (2011), with the addition of three more themes (exoticisation, assumption of universal LGBT experience, and threatening behaviours). Similarly, Platt and Lenzen (2013), confirmed five themes that were conceptualised by Sue (2010), which were homophobia, heterosexist language/terminology, endorsement of heteronormative culture, oversexualisation, and sinfulness, and added two more themes (microaggressions as humour and undersexualisation). Table 1 outlines the various themes identified by previous research.

Table 1: Microaggression Themes in Literature

Sue (2010)	**Nadal et al. (2011)**	**Platt & Lenzen (2013)**
1.Homophobia	1.Discomfort/disapproval of LGBT experience	1.Homophobia
2.Heterosexist language / terminology	2.Use of heterosexist and transphobic language	2.Heterosexist language / terminology
3.Heteronormative culture and behaviour	3.Endorsement of heteronormative/gender normative culture	3.Endorsement of heteronormative culture
4.Oversexualization	-	4.Oversexualization
5.Sinfulness	-	5.Sinfulness
6.Abnormality	4.Assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality	-
7.Denial of heterosexism	5.Denial of heterosexism / homophobia	-
-	6.Exoticisation	-
-	7.Assumption of universal LGBTI experience (Out-group homogeneity)	-
-	-	6.Microaggressions as humour
-	-	7.Undersexualization
-	8.Threatening Behaviour	-

Although themes identified by Nadal and colleagues (2011), and Platt and Lenzen (2013) were taken into account, themes formulated by Sue (2010) formed the basis of this research, as it involves the most extensive literature review and has a robust theoretical framework of microaggressions, which are herein covered in more detail. The theme of *Homophobia* is rooted in an irrational fear of homosexuals and reflects a fear of transmission, of becoming gay, or fear of contracting an ailment from LGBTI+s. It is also believed that exposure to LGBTI+s will inevitably influence others to follow suit. In this theme, microaggressions are manifested as avoiding contact with LGBTI+s, restricting children's exposure to LGBTI+s in their neighbourhoods, and communication of their irrational concerns and aversions toward LGBTI+s.

The theme *Heterosexist Language/Terminology*, as evident from the title, entail heterosexist and derogatory terminology directed toward the LGBTI+. Users of this sort of language are often unaware of the denigratory nature of their comments, such as using the term ‘gay’ instead of referring to something as stupid or bizarre. Despite the indirect nature of this sort of microaggression, research shows that such comments not only discourage LGBTI+ and impact their sense of identity and self-confidence, but also reflects and reinforces a heterosexist worldview in which the LGBTI+ do not fit.

Much like heterosexist language/terminology, the theme *Heteronormative Culture and Behaviour*, reflects a social environment that reinforces, endorses, and validates heterosexuality as a lifestyle, and publicizes heterosexuality as normative. This sort of environment serves to oppress and invalidate the existence of LGBTI+s, as well as dehumanizing them. The underlying issue in societies is the assumption of heterosexuality, and the expectation that everyone should adhere to the imposed values, norms, and gender roles. This manifests in everyday conversations, where women are often asked about their ‘boyfriend’ instead of partner, or men are told not act so ‘feminine’ in public.

The *Oversexualization* theme entails the perception of LGBTI+ individuals as overly sexual beings rather than multifaceted people with particular interests, aspirations, careers, family, friends, and non-sexual relationships. This sort of microaggression enables perpetrators to direct conversations toward sexual themes. An example for this would be to ask a gay man whether he had sex with a woman before deciding they were gay.

Sinfulness is a theme in which LGBTI+s are viewed as sinful, perverted and punishable individuals. Almost all religions regard homosexuality as nefarious, and those who carry out their sexual desires as violating the teachings of their religion.

The theme, *Abnormality,* reflects the view that LGBTI+s are sick or mentally ill due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The pathologizing of LGBTI+ occur when they are advised to seek therapy or told they are only going through a phase.

Finally, the *Denial of Heterosexism* theme allows perpetrators to avoid taking responsibility for and diminish the impact of their microaggressive comments by denying their discriminatory actions and labelling their comments as 'jokes'. This denial of responsibility further weakens LGBTI+s power and ability to defend themselves against such actions, as once they object to this microaggression, they would be perceived as combative or sensitive, depending on the person or the situation.

The impact of these microaggressions can accumulate over time and, in line with minority stress theory (Meyer 2003; Meyer et al., 2021), can contribute to the development of psychological problems and other negative outcomes among targeted groups (Sue, 2010), including sexual (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual) and gender (e.g., transgender, gender nonconforming) minorities (Nadal et al., 2011a; Nadal et al. 2011b; Sue, 2010). For instance, heterosexist microaggressions have been associated with reduced self-acceptance and greater psychological distress (Woodford et al., 2014) as well as posttraumatic stress symptoms (Robinson, 2014), while cisgenderist microaggressions have been linked to emotional distress and disruption in friendships (Galupo et al., 2014). In educational mediums, utterance of the

microaggression such as “that’s so gay” has been identified as damaging to LGBTI+s sense of belonging, as well as their physical health and wellbeing (Woodford et al., 2012). Microinvalidations and microinsults coming from family members or work colleagues cause minorities to undermine their identities by modifying their behaviours or clothing to make others around them more comfortable (Nadal et al., 2011a). Nadal and colleagues have further outlined the most prominent emotional outcomes of microaggressions, which were described as anger, frustration, sadness, disappointment, and shame (Nadal et al., 2011b). The chronic experiencing of such negative emotional outcomes may play a role in the development of mood dysregulations, and even psychological problems in the LGBTI+ (Sue, 2010).

In contrast to microaggressions, microaffirmations, small acts of inclusion and caring that are timely and clear, serve to support, strengthen, and provide comfort to those who are in distress (Rowe, 2008). In the next section, microaffirmations and related themes will be discussed.

1.5 Microaffirmations

Microaffirmations are not a separate construct from microaggressions, and both may be conceptualized along a continuum (Sterzing & Gartner, 2018). Within the family system, the acceptance of one parent and the rejection of the other may result in a mixture of positive and negative experiences for sexual minorities (Ryan et al., 2009, 2010).

On par with microaggressions, microaffirmations may be encountered at the interpersonal level or environmentally. Research into LGBTI+ microaffirmations is scarce and are highly specific to include only those belonging to one sub-group of

the LGBTI+ community, such as bisexual women, and trans individuals (Flanders et al., 2016; Glynn et al., 2016). One such research is Flanders et al. (2020)'s study into microaffirmation experiences of bisexual women.

At the interpersonal level, Flanders et al. (2016) identified eight themes related to bisexual individuals' experiences with microaffirmations. *Dating, romantic, or sexual behaviour* refers to the affirming and validating nature of having someone be romantically or sexually attracted to them. *Social support* encapsulates support received from friends, family, and partners. *Community belonging* entails having friends who also identify as queer or bisexual, which allows them to be open about their orientation in a safe and accepting environment. For some, *coming out*, the process of telling someone about their sexual orientation for the first time, evoked support and solidarity from friends and family. *Peer normalization* of bisexuality may be demonstrated through a lack of significant response to a coming out event or a lack of reaction to learning about someone's same-sex partner. *Discussing bisexual issues* was also an affirming experience for many, as well as *social media interactions*, and *interactions related to study participation*, where many participants felt empowered to speak openly about bisexuality with others.

At the institutional level, four themes were identified, which were *institutional support*, the supportiveness of those in positions of power and influence; *institutional normalisation of bisexuality*, which entails the experience of being treated normally at school, work, or other similar institutional settings; *activism*, the act of fighting for one's and their group's rights; and *media representation*, which outlines the affirming role of LGBTI representation in traditional or social media (Flanders et al., 2016).

For sexual minorities, such microaffirmations may be identity-based, and such positive sexual identity experiences serve to validate their identity and improve their self-esteem (Flanders et al., 2016), thus leading to higher psychological wellbeing, such as decreased stress and anxiety, especially in transgender women (Flanders, 2015; Glynn et al., 2016). In interpersonal contexts, for example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) young adults who report higher parental acceptance of their sexual orientation and gender expression during adolescence (e.g., parents talked openly about my sexual orientation) have better general health, higher self-esteem and social support, and lower levels of depression, substance abuse, sexual risk taking, and suicidality compared to their counterparts with lower family acceptance (Ryan et al., 2010). Furthermore, in institutional settings, it was found that LGTBI+ students who attended schools that actively promoted a Gay-Straight Alliance reported feeling safer and could easily receive support from adults (Walls et al., 2010).

As in any group process, several participant roles, other than that of the perpetrator and the target, are considered in instances of microaggressions and microaffirmations. A notable actor in this process is the bystander, or someone who can offer microaffirmations to the target following an experience with a perpetrator (Skinta & Harding, 2022).

1.6 The Role of Bystanders

Bystander intervention has a critical role in the prevention of discrimination against marginalised groups, and the cultivation of a safe, inclusive, and supportive space, especially in school campuses (Dessel et al., 2017; Frey et al., 2014; McGuire et al., 2023; Woodford et al., 2012). Bystander intervention in cases of LGBTI+

discrimination can prevent the dissemination of heterosexism and provide emotional support to those targeted by perpetrators (Aboud & Joong, 2008). In terms of bullying, bystander intervention has been identified as an effective deterrent, as it was found that most bullying incidents were terminated once a bystander intervened (Hawkins et al., 2001).

An initial model of bystander intervention conceptualised by Latané and Darley (1970), and later supported by contemporary research, posits that in instances of bullying, there are five sequential steps that bystanders experience. First, the harassment situation must be noticed, then interpreted as requiring intervention, followed by taking on the responsibility of intervening, which requires knowledge on how to intervene, and the implementation of the decision to intervene (Latané & Darley, 1970; Bennett et al., 2014; Nickerson et al., 2014).

Despite a lack of research on bystander roles in LGBTI+ microaggression experiences, research on bullying may provide insight into this issue. Salmivalli and colleagues theorise, bullying is a group process which involves the presence of those other than the bully and the victim. (Salmivalli et al., 1996, 2011). Supporters actively help the perpetration of the bullying, reinforcers passively support the bullying by laughing along, disengaged onlookers merely observe the act without taking action, while defenders actively support the victim by directly confronting the bully (Salmivalli et al., 2011). Relatedly, the notion that bullying is an intergroup process is also based in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), whereby several intergroup factors including group membership and identification (Ojala & Nesdale, 2004), influence the behaviours of children and adolescents in bullying incidents (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009; Gini, 2006). Research shows that children

experience pressure to conform to their group's norms, even when they are prejudiced and stereotypical (Nesdale et al., 2005; Rutland et al., 2010). Subsequently, children's support of bullying depends on whether such behaviour is regarded as normative or anti-normative for their peer group (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009). In fact, Pozzoli and Gini (2010) found that peers were more likely to intervene in bullying incidents by defending the victim when there was a group-normative pressure to do so.

Regarding the intentionality of bystanders to intervene in homophobic bullying cases, research suggests several factors as determinants of intervention, one being who the bystander knows in the incident, as bystanders may refrain from intervening if they are not familiar with the perpetrator (Wernick et al., 2013). Research on bias-based bullying indicated that students who lacked close proximity, relationships, or shared marginalized identities with minorities, justified their decision not to intervene by claiming ignorance and minding their own business (Byers & Cerulli, 2021). In the same vein, research investigating the role of peer familiarity in instances of homophobic bullying, namely incidents where the bystander does not know anybody, knows only the witnesses or targets, knows only the perpetrator, or knows everyone, has found that certain factors, such as having LGBTI+ friends, having high-self-esteem, having positive attitudes toward the LGBTI+, being older, and receiving courses with a social justice content, were linked to a rise in intentions to intervene across all contexts (Dessel et al., 2017; Poteat & Vecho, 2016). Markedly, it was found that, for adolescents, even indirect contact in the form of extended media-based contact was impactful in increasing bystanders' intentions to intervene, especially for adolescent boys (McGuire et al., 2023).

Similarly, bystanders' inaction during homophobic bullying might also be due to a fear of social contagion, which refers to a fear of being mislabelled and assumed as part of the LBGTI+ community (António et al., 2018). Concerns over social contagion have been found to be related to negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men and their denigration (Plant et al., 2014). Such findings suggest that fears based on group membership are not only consequential in bystander intentionality but also in the perpetration of bullying.

There is an accumulating body of knowledge on general bystander intervention, nevertheless, not enough is known regarding LGBTI+s expectations from bystanders in the face of microaggressions. Therefore, the current aim of the study was to further shed light on the experiences of microaggressions and microaffirmations in the LGBTI+ community within the context of north Cyprus, and to further investigate their expectations of bystanders in such circumstances.

Since context plays a critical role in the expressions and hence experiences of microaggressions and microaffirmations in the LGBTI+ community (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2012), it is first necessary to discuss the LGBTI+ community within the context of the northern part of Cyprus.

1.7 Context of Cyprus

Turkish speaking Cypriots in the northern part of Cyprus, are typically affiliated with the Turkish culture and adhere to certain Turkish customs and beliefs which represent a dominant heterosexist and heteronormative ideology (Husnu & Mertan, 2017). Non-western cultures, such as the Turkish culture, tend to have a strong male dominance and a significant presence of gender stereotypes, particularly when compared to western society (Husnu & Mertan, 2017; Kagitcibasi, 1982). In North

Cyprus, the topic of LGBTQ+ issues is still considered to be taboo, leading many LGBTQ+ individuals to be reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation. Additionally, reports indicate that these individuals have been subjected to verbal abuse, as well as physical or sexual violence (Dürüst & Çağlar, 2015; West et al., 2014). A report looking into attitudes toward sexual orientation in the north of Cyprus in a nationally representative sample, showed that homophobia had the highest score, followed by biphobia, then attitudes toward non-binary individuals, and finally, transphobia (Queer Cyprus Association [QCA], 2021). Regarding LGBTI+ rights specific to their equal right to marry and to adopt, participants were more likely to report being against it than in support of it. However, in terms of establishing laws against discrimination, more were in support of it rather than against it despite also reporting that the community's needs were sufficiently met.

An examination of the predictors of negative attitudes indicated that gender, education level, nationality, location, and religiosity, all predicted negative attitudes toward the LGBTI+. Men were found to hold more negative attitudes toward the LGBTI+ compared to women; as education level increased, negative attitudes decreased; and as religiosity increased, negative attitudes also increased, which are all consistent with past literature findings (D'Amore et al., 2022; Norton & Herek, 2013; Worthen, 2017). Furthermore, it was discovered that Turkish participants held more negative attitudes compared to Turkish Cypriot participants; and finally, those living in rural areas held more negative attitudes than those who live in more urban areas (QCA, 2021).

Regarding contact, more than half of participants reported having no contact with a member of the LGBTI+ community in contrast to only 8% who had contact, while

approximately 60% reported not having any friends from the LGBTI+ community. Nevertheless, it was found that an increase in positive contact and friendships with the LGBTI+ predicted a decrease in negative attitudes, which is in accordance with previous research (QCA, 2021; Bagci et al., 2020; Piumatti & Salvati, 2020).

Findings have also shown that LGBTI+'s have reported a reluctance at disclosing their sexual orientation and gender identity in public arenas within the context of North Cyprus (Dürüst & Çağlar, 2015) and report experiencing insults, physical and sexual violence (Uluboy, 2011). One study by Uluboy and Husnu (2022) conducted in the north of Cyprus investigating young adults' attitudes toward transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, reported that transphobic attitudes were predicted by high levels of hostile sexism, homophobic attitudes, and a lack of or low-quality contact with the LGBTI+ community. It was argued that such negative attitudes not only reflect judgements on wider issues such as gender roles and gender identities that go beyond the heteronormative understanding of said constructs, but also are rooted in the culture in north Cyprus where a traditional gender ideology is embraced, and a patriarchal societal and familial structure is the norm (Uluboy & Husnu, 2022).

Considering this context, the current study aimed to assess microaggression and microaffirmations experienced by the LGBTI+ community, as well as their reactions to microaggressions and their emotional outcomes, while at the same time investigating their expectations of bystanders during such instances.

1.8 Aims and Research Questions

Numerous factors may contribute to the prevalence of microaggressions in the LGBTI+ community. It can be argued that the inactivity of bystanders during or following an act of microaggression may have the most profound effect on this phenomenon. There is minimal, if any, research concerning LGBTI+'s perception of and expectations from bystanders during microaggressions, as research has mainly focused on reporting their experiences with microaggressions and microaffirmations in bisexual individuals (Flanders et al., 2016; Flanders et al., 2019; Platt & Lenzen, 2013) and in the family context, using quantitative methods (Sterzing & Gartner, 2018). Empirical research on issues regarding LGBTI+ in the northern part of Cyprus is not only scarce but also limited to exploring societal attitudes toward LGBTI+ rather than reporting experiences of the LGBTI+.

Therefore, based on the limitations of previous research, this research aims to fill a gap in the literature by: (1) reporting the experiences of LGBTI+'s with microaggressions and microaffirmations in the context of North Cyprus, including their reactions to such instances and the emotional outcomes; (2) identifying potential additional themes while verifying the existing of themes identified by previous research; (3) assessing LGBTI+'s perceptions and expectations of bystanders in instances of microaggressions.

Chapter 2

METHOD

2.1 Rationale for Qualitative Research

This study has adopted a qualitative research design with the purpose of capturing in-depth and meaningful data to gather a more comprehensive understanding of human emotions, thoughts, and behaviour. Qualitative research is also well-suited for investigating social phenomena about which little is known or where more context is crucial (Palmer & Bolderston, 2006). In qualitative research the fundamental aim is to acquire a deeper understanding of the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of interviewees with direct interactions, in the form of conversations (Sutton & Austin, 2015). To aid in the attainment of such meaningful information, the interviewing researchers committed to building rapport and trust with the participants using attentive and active listening (Roller, 2015). The study utilized a combined thematic content analysis technique, which involved both deductive and inductive approaches, to gain insight into the subjective experiences of microaggressions among individuals belonging to the LGBTI community residing in Northern Cyprus. This information can be found in Table 3. As Bingham and Witkowsky (2022) have recently suggested that a data analysis process that draws on both deductive and inductive analysis supports a more organized, rigorous, and analytically sound qualitative study. Likewise, Proudfoot (2023) has stated that this combined approach helps to ensure that the voices of the participants are valued, while simultaneously allowing for more theory-led analysis. It is argued such an approach carries real

merit and could be more commonly deployed. Deductive analysis entails utilizing a priori knowledge and the application of theoretical frameworks to evaluate data and to test the validity of the theory. It is a method of data analysis that follows a top-down approach. During qualitative analysis, this typically involves the utilization of pre-established codes to categorize the data (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). This approach is based on previously identified thematic codes in the literature about microaggressions experienced by LGBTI members. These codes serve as a theoretical and conceptual framework, and the existence of experiences or statements that correspond to these themes is examined. Employing deductive coding methods facilitated the organization and categorization of the data according to predetermined theoretical frameworks. This approach enabled a more systematic study of the data inside a well-established and rigorously hypothesized conceptual framework (Proudfoot, 2023). Conversely, inductive analysis is an approach that involves the researcher's examination of the data and the identification of codes and concepts that are within the data. This approach is mostly a "bottom-up" analytical approach to data analysis (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). This analytical approach was conducted simultaneously with a deductive approach to investigate whether new or different perspectives, experiences, or instances of microaggressions specific to the context of Northern Cyprus were expressed, beyond the predetermined themes. During this process, an initial coding system was first utilized, and any evidence of new and emerging themes were also examined. This approach assisted in understanding precisely what occurred in the context of north Cyprus without imposing any theoretical framework on each individual experience of microaggression.

2.2 Participants

A total of 15 individuals belonging to the LGBTI+ community residing in the Northern part of Cyprus with an age range of 20 to 50 (M = 27.93), were recruited to report their experiences with microaggressions and microaffirmations, and their perceptions of and expectations from bystanders. However, one interview falling short of 15 minutes was excluded from the analysis as the data obtained was not sufficient for a meaningful analysis. In terms of educational background, participants included five university graduates, four high-school graduates currently enrolled at the Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU), three with a master's degree, and two with a PhD. Their income ranged from middle to high, with most of leaning toward a middle income. Five of the participants identified their gender as female, another five as male, and two identified as non-binary. The remaining two participants identified as transgender, one as a trans woman and the other as a trans man. In terms of sexual orientation, five of them expressed that they were bisexual, three identified as gay, another three identified as lesbian, and one as pansexual, while both transgender participants reported having an orientation toward the opposite gender and were thus classified as heterosexual. See Table 2 for details.

Table 2: Participant Demographic Characteristics

	N	%
Education level		
University	5	35.71
High school	4	28.57
MSc	3	21.43
PhD	2	14.29
Income		
Middle	9	64.29
Middle-High	4	28.57
High	1	7.14
Gender identity		
Female	5	35.71
Male	5	35.71
Non-binary	2	7.14
Trans man	1	7.14
Trans woman	1	14.29
Sexual Orientation		
Lesbian	3	21.43
Gay	3	21.43
Bisexual	5	35.71
Heterosexual	2	14.28
Pansexual	1	7.14
N=14		

2.3 Procedure

Once ethical approval from the Social, Humanities and Administrative Sciences Ethics Subcommittee of EMU was obtained, participants were selected through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling to ensure that they possessed the characteristics relevant to the study and were easily accessible and available. Hence, undergraduate students studying at the EMU who identified as LGBTI+, members of the LGBTI+ organisation called Queer Cyprus Association, and individuals who were known to researchers as members of the LGBTI+ were reached out to and asked whether they would like to take part in a semi-structured interview inquiring about their experiences with microaggressions and microaffirmations. Upon their agreement, they were invited to the research assistants' office at the EMU's Psychology Department, to participate in a 30–40-minute, semi-structured interview. Interview durations ranged from 20 minutes to 75 minutes. Although

semi-structured interviews commence with targeted questions aimed at soliciting the information of interest, they also allow for flexibility and adaptation throughout the course of the interview (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Such interviews with open ended questions provide opportunities for participants to express their emotions, thoughts, and experiences in-depth and without interruption from the interviewer. The rich descriptions elicited from their stories are fundamental to the qualitative nature of this research.

The interviews were carried out between the months of July and August and were conducted in Turkish as it is the main spoken language in the northern part of Cyprus and have been translated to English. Questions asked within the scope of the interview explored participants' experiences with microaggressions and microaffirmations, as well as their perceptions of and expectations from bystanders (see Appendix A for the interview questions). At the commencement of the interviews, participants were thanked for their willingness to participate and informed that they had a right to withdraw from the research at any point without any consequences. Thus, following an introductory phase, participants were initially provided with a brief explanation of what microaggressions were and asked to share their most memorable experience, especially one that was witnessed by others. The following questions pertained to their emotions and responses, the observed reactions of others, and their expectation from bystanders in such instances of microaggressions. Participants were then briefed on microaffirmations, and likewise, were asked to share their most memorable experience along with the emotional impact of micro affirmative encounters. Ultimately, participants were thanked for

their involvement and were told to get in contact with the researchers or the ethical committee if they had any questions or concerns.

In qualitative research the fundamental aim is to acquire a deeper understanding of the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of interviewees with direct interactions, in the form of conversations (Sutton & Austin, 2015). To aid in the attainment of such meaningful information, the interviewing researchers committed to building rapport and trust with the participants using attentive and active listening (Roller, 2015).

Throughout the study, participants' privacy and confidentiality was maintained. The transcripts were stored anonymously in the password protected computers of the researchers.

2.4 Process of Data Analysis

As part of the semi-structured interviews, participants were each asked a total of seven questions related to their experiences with microaggressions and microaffirmations, their perceptions of and expectations from bystanders. The semi-structured interviews conducted within the scope of this research were transcribed in entirety through the transcription feature in Microsoft Word and compared with the original recording to make any necessary corrections. When the transcripts were combined, the resulting document was made up of 133 pages (Times New Roman, 12 points, single-spaced).

Concerning the accuracy of the data analysis process, it is important to note that, qualitative research diverges from the quantitative approach in terms of the epistemological assumptions on the location of knowledge and the construction of knowledge. Qualitative research operates under the epistemological assumption that

each human possesses a unique perspective of the world. Consequently, it becomes challenging to generalize findings and make inferences solely based on quantitative research. Hence, a phenomenon can be examined through the lens of individual experiences and perspectives by employing the qualitative research approach (Soiferman, 2010). Thus, the role of qualitative researchers is not to uncover universally objective truths, but rather to utilize their theoretical knowledge to analyse and convey the various viewpoints on a certain subject (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

In place of the conventional standards used to evaluate quantitative research, qualitative researchers have offered alternative quality criteria (Bauer et al., 2000). These methods encompass transparent reporting of the analytical procedures, which provide "thick descriptions" with ample measurements of raw data, triangulation between multiple studies, considering exceptional cases, and seeking validation of the accuracy of analytical interpretations from external auditors and/or research participants (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). In the same way, qualitative researchers argue that terms related to reliability and validity are not suitable for evaluating qualitative work and that the use of quantitative metrics like intercoder reliability may pose epistemological problems (Creswell, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2013).

As recommended by Creswell (2013), there are 8 procedures including prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, rich and thick description, and external audits for examining the accuracy of a qualitative analysis.

Moreover, the author has suggested that for examining the accuracy of the study, at least two of these procedures need to be assessed.

For the present study the main four procedures were examined. First, the themes were distinguished from each other along with a *rich and thick descriptions* which allows their transferability. To clarify, providing a thorough definition of the themes allows for the identification of interconnected elements and facilitates the transfer of knowledge to different contexts (Creswell, 2013). As an additional step in Creswell's (2013) accuracy approach, the extended involvement and continuous observation in the field involve establishing trust with participants, familiarizing oneself with the culture, and verifying the correctness of information to identify any distortions caused by the researcher or informants. In this study, it is believed that the researcher's nationality (Cypriot) and sensitivity to societal issues, in combination with the educational and vocational background of the main advisor and external auditor of this study, who has done extensive work on LGBTI+ issues, as well as being a Cypriot herself, helped prevent distortions based on misinterpretations of participants' expressions. Using an external consultant or auditor is another strategy for assessing the accuracy of the data analysis (Creswell, 2013) and provides a sense of interrater reliability to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this purpose, the main supervisor was asked to be an external auditor to examine both the process of analysis and assessing the accuracy of the data analysis. The *external auditor* first had no knowledge of the content of the interviews and initially assessed if the findings, interpretations, and conclusions were substantiated by the data. In *triangulation*, a method employed to ensure the accuracy of data analysis (Creswell, 2013), there was the utilization of a combined analytical approach that incorporates

both deductive and inductive approaches, along with multiple theoretical perspectives and research outcomes. The research findings were substantiated by several sources, including earlier qualitative and quantitative research evidence, in order to provide insight into the themes in question. The utilization of diverse data sources facilitated the process of triangulating the information, hence enhancing the credibility of the conclusions (Creswell, 2013).

At the first stage of the thematic content analysis a codebook of codes were generated based on the pre-established themes of past literature. Next, the first 5 transcripts were read independently by two coders (the researcher & co-supervisor) and each transcript was coded. After the coding process, the initial codes were examined by the two researchers by an in-person meeting. The preliminary codebook was evaluated based on the thematic titles and the textual components encompassed inside the themes. Each code was precisely delineated within a comprehensive description and differentiated from one another based on their respective content. During the third stage, two coders individually coded five further transcripts (transcripts 6 to 10) and subsequently compared their codes. Intercoder agreement was achieved through a meeting where they discussed the content assigned to the codes. Subsequently, the pair of coders independently coded the final four transcripts (transcripts 11-15) and subsequently compared their respective code assignments for each corresponding text. The deductive approach is acknowledged for its capacity to restrict the researcher's perspective by introducing a restricted theoretical framework (Flick, 2014). To reduce this risk, in examining each transcript, discussions were held to determine whether additional themes specific to the north of Cyprus would emerge by using an inductive approach. After the

culmination of the coding process, data outcomes were sent to the main supervisor acting as an external auditor to examine whether the findings, interpretations and conclusions are supported by the data. As a criterion for the interrater reliability, percentage of interrater agreement, which is a method employed by qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994), was calculated. Previous exploratory research has also used this method (Nadal et al., 2011a). The percentage of the agreements among three coders (the researcher and two supervisors) was calculated and first there was an 80% agreement among the three coders along with the 10 themes for microaggression experiences. Although the literature often considers a minimum agreement of 80% acceptable, all coders engaged in a renewed discussion to attain complete consensus of 100% on themes. The decision was made to reclassify the existing two themes into two broader categories, leading to unanimous consensus (100%) among the three coders about the 8 themes. For microaffirmations, one of the eight topics was disputed by the third researcher which resulted in an 87.5% agreement at first, but this rate was increased to 100% after rearranging the experiences under another category to attain consensus.

Chapter 3

RESULTS

This section will primarily examine participants' encounters with microaggressions, their interpretations of the purposefulness and intentionality of aggressors, their reactions to microaggressions, and the emotional consequences of these encounters. The following section will explore instances of microaffirmations, followed by the participants' expectations from bystanders who have witnessed or may witness episodes of microaggressions.

3.1 Microaggressions

During the process of analysis, transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were coded by two researchers. Through the coding process, in addition to the categorisation of themes, percentages of who the perpetrators were, time and location of microaggression experiences, bystander perceptions, and emotional and behavioral outcomes of microaggressions were calculated from participants' responses.

3.1.1 Microaggression Experiences

Within the scope of the semi-structured interviews, the first question posed inquired about participants' experiences with microaggressions. At the onset of their responses, most participants used expressions such as "a lot" and "so much so that", which conveyed the prevalence of microaggressions in many facets and time periods of their life.

Despite asking participants to recount their most prominent memory of a microaggression which involved others who witnessed it, almost all participants reported more than one experience with microaggressions. From participants' responses, 79 different accounts of microaggressions were uncovered. However, a total of 89 microaggressions were identified through analysis, and of those experiences, 37 were microassaults (41.57%), 35 were microinvalidations (39.33%), and 17 were microinsults (19.10%).

Most instances detailed by participants indicated that the occurrence of microaggressions were spread across time (34.18%), while the rest mainly took place during university (25.32%), high school (18.99%), work (12.66%), middle school (5.10%), and childhood (3.79%) years. Regarding the mediums in which microaggressions were experienced, many incidents were apparent in educational settings, such as universities, high schools, and middle schools (30.38%), at home (11.39%), in the workplace (11.39%), social gatherings (8.86%), in the media (3.79%), in public (2.54%), and in institutional settings (2.54%). However, it is unknown or unspecified where a large number of such experiences took place as they relate to generalised accounts of microaggressions (30.38%).

In terms of the aggressors, participants' accounts revealed that a considerable amount of microaggressions were committed by schoolmates (24.10%) and friends (18.99%), while some were perpetrated by strangers (12.66%). There were some generalised accounts from which the perpetrators could not be identified (12.66%), while the rest entailed microaggressions from close family members (8.86%), colleagues (7.59%), acquaintances (5.10%), distant family members (2.53%), the media (2.53%), teachers (1.27%), psychologists (1.27%), and politicians through the media (1.27%).

3.1.2 Microaggression Themes

The semi-structured interviews yielded 89 distinct microaggression instances from participants' responses. While the deductive component of the analysis revealed 8 themes related to microaggression experiences, the inductive component of analysis did not yield novel themes apparent in the LGBTI+ community in Northern Cyprus. The themes were hostile discrimination, compulsory heterosexuality and masculinity/femininity, heteronormative culture and politics, modern and symbolic discrimination, abnormality, out-group homogeneity, benevolent heterosexism, and sinfulness (see table 3). The order in which the emergent themes will be discussed is arranged from most salient to least in the following section.

Table 3: Microaggression Themes

No.	Theme	Freq.	%	Descriptions including the initial codes
1	Hostile Discrimination	28	31.46	-Dehumanising / heterosexist / derogatory terminology -Outward expressions of homophobia/hate (verbal/non-verbal) -Disapproving or hateful looks / comments / whispering / gossiping / etc. -Social exclusion -Rejection
2	Compulsory heterosexuality & masculinity / femininity	24	26.97	-Assumption of heterosexuality -Higher value on heterosexual relationships / lifestyles -Heterosexuality is the norm -Denial of sexualities other than heterosexuality
3	Modern & symbolic discrimination	13	14.61	-Denial of heterosexism / homophobia -Microaggressions as humour -Oversexualisation of LGBTI+
4	Heteronormative Culture and Politics	6	6.74	-Higher value on heterosexuality at the societal and institutional level -Ingrained societal bias that heterosexuality is the norm -Climate of normality and abnormality -Political messages of discriminatory attitudes / policies
5	Abnormality	6	6.74	-Describing LGBTI+s as 'sick' or 'mentally ill' -Pathologizing LGBTI+s by considering it a mental illness
6	Out-group Homogeneity	5	5.62	-All LGBTI+ experience is the same -All gay men are flamboyant -All lesbians have a certain look -Accusation of being LGBTI+
7	Benevolent Heterosexism	5	5.62	-Exoticisation and objectification of LGBTI+ -LGBTI+ are glamorous / fantastical / fabulous / inherently good -Fascination / amusement at the LGBTI
8	Sinfulness	2	2.25	-LGBTI+ are sinful / depraved / worthy of punishment
Total		89	100%	

As is seen in table 3, the most dominant theme emerging from participants responses was *hostile discrimination.* Such incidents included in this theme were not only characterised by a combination of phobia, disdain, and hostility toward the LGBTI+ community, but also mainly consisted of verbal microassaults in the form of heterosexist language and terminology (Carter & Forsyth, 2010). This form of microaggression was alternatively expressed in the form of exclusionary attitudes from both heterosexual peers and LGBTI+ peers, expression of apprehensions,

anxieties, and disapproval toward LGBTI+, threatening behaviour, and harassment. Hence, the more encompassing term of hostile discrimination was ultimately decided upon for this theme.

Participants described 28 individual instances of hostile discrimination, including being subjected to dehumanising and derogatory terminology, such as “Faggot” or “fairy”. Many referred to such name-calling as belittling, demeaning, condescending, and degrading, especially during their high school years. A distinctive example of this can be observed in the statements of Participant 1, who identified as non-binary and bisexual. They expressed frustration at how their peers used the participant’s sexual orientation as a means of disrupting the class by calling them belittling names:

> I remember I had two friends in class and because they constantly wanted to disrupt class, they wanted to use me as a way to do that. I remember one solid example where, I don’t remember how exactly it started, but I was sitting at the front with one of my friends, and they were sitting at the very back, trying to disrupt class. When that didn’t work, they started coming on to me based on my sexual orientation saying, ‘What’s up queen?’ and picking on me (27, MSc).

Another participant (P4), who identified as a pansexual male, recounted an event during his university years that he attended with his non-binary partner. In the participant’s telling of the incident, the aggressors had made jokes by using derogatory terms with an underlying implication that they regarded the participant and his partner as beneath them by feigning a welcoming attitude. In his own words:

> He was saying ‘We’re open to everyone’ and laughing. Hollering. There was another friend next to him, another classmate. There were about 2-3 people there, but there were only two of them. Then, I think he made a joke saying, ‘Faggots come this way’ or ‘Faggots can join the dance’. Then he said, ‘What’s wrong with it’, as if he was trying to be welcoming, but it made me very uncomfortable (27, MSc).

Some participants also described how the use of derogatory terms such as 'transvestite' were used to refer to things people disliked or disapproved of, insinuating that being a transvestite or gay is undesirable (P4); how strangers would yell offensive terminology out of car windows (P5); how they were asked to describe 'what' they are (P6); and many further recounted experiences of the hostile discrimination microaggression which reflected the aggressors' discomfort or disapproval of LGBT experience. For instance, Participant 9, a bisexual woman, mentioned the judgemental looks she receives during public displays of affection with her female partner:

> I never felt comfortable with women in my orientation. Regardless of how accepting the environment is, whenever I kissed a woman in public I always felt those looks on me (23, Bachelor's).

Compulsory heterosexuality & masculinity/femininity is the second most prominent theme emerging from participants' responses. In this theme, there is an expectation that LGBTI+ individuals should act like or be heterosexuals, along with the expectation that gender be expressed in a way that conforms to societally determined gender norms, hence, the implication that men should look masculine, and women should look feminine (Potgieter 2006; Seidman, 2019). Participants reported 24 instances in which they were often assumed to be heterosexuals or were either implicitly or explicitly forced by others to conceal their LGBTI+ experience, behave in a manner that reflects heteronormativity, and even change their gender expression to conform to societal gender norms. To illustrate, Participant 9, reported her experience with a microinvalidation wherein her friends attempted to steer her toward checking out men instead of women:

> My friends saying 'Should we not look at women?', 'Can we just check out men?', were committing a microaggression on me (23, bisexual woman, Bachelor's).

A similar microinvalidation incident was recounted by Participant 10, a trans woman, where her friends had pressured her into deciding between fully transitioning into a woman or behaving in a manner that is concurrent with her gender assigned at birth (male):

> ‘Bro, it doesn't work like this. Either go all in if that's what you really want, or progress according to the body I have now. You know, there are ways they try to force me into a mold, and it's really messing with my head... leaving question marks like, 'Why did they say that?' Because honestly, they all know I'm content with how I am. But forcefully, in a well-intentioned way, they're like, 'It doesn't work like this. Either be like this or like that.' (20, high school graduate).

The third most commonly emerging theme was *modern and symbolic discrimination.* Microaggressions within this theme are often related to the oversexualisation of the LGBTI+ community, denial of heterosexist attitudes, comments, and behaviours, as well as jokes and puns that are essentially microinsults or microinvalidations against sexual minorities (DiMarco et al., 2015; 2021). Microaggressions disguised as jokes and humour were often perpetrated by friends of the LGBTI+ (P2, P4, P9). Participants disclosed a total of 13 microaggression in the form of modern and symbolic discrimination. For example, Participant 13, a trans man, described such an instant where the aggressor was simultaneously discriminating against the participant and denying that they were being discriminatory:

> "My girlfriend's sister said to me, 'I'm not against it. I mean, I respect it, but you can never sit like that next to me.'" (24, high school).

In some cases, as exemplified by Participant 2, aggressors attempt to conceal their microaggressive statements by masking them off as jokes:

> "I am bisexual. One day, while we were hanging out at ‘Pasaj’[cafe], a friend of mine suddenly said something about the fact that I haven't been in a relationship with any woman for a long time, making a joke related to my

> bisexuality and the fact that it seems to have declined, simply because I've only been with men for a while." (22, bisexual man, high school).

In *Heteronormative culture and politics*, the fourth most apparent theme, there were 6 accounts given for this microaggression by participants 2, 3, 10, and 13, in which they were exposed to explicit heteronormative messages in culture and politics, especially by those of social influence, such as being made fun of when registering an activist organisation in a governmental setting or having a political leader argue that being LGBTI+ is unacceptable. To demonstrate, Participant 2 recounted a recurring experience of being warned against public displays of affection during concerts, and expressed that heterosexual couples never received the same treatment:

> "So, like, I'm a person who loves electronic music. I go to parties a lot and all. It's never a problem when heterosexual couples kiss or anything, but whenever I do something with my boyfriend, security comes and warns me not to do it. I end up having to argue at every party, saying, 'Why shouldn't I do it? Then go warn the heterosexuals too.' I mean, if it's a general rule not to do something inside, I'm okay with that. But if I'm warned because of my sexual orientation, then I'm not okay. I mean, go ahead and do your thing; it doesn't concern me." (22, bisexual man, high school).

Likewise, Participant 13, expressed his disparagement at hearing the discriminatory remarks of the recently re-elected president of Turkey:

> "Already, in the victory speech on the balcony after taking office, the first sentence he uttered about LGBT individuals was 'It disrupts the family structure,' and I'm just sitting in front of the TV, looking like this." (24, trans man, high school).

Abnormality is the fifth theme, with 6 accounts disclosed by participants 4, 8, 13, and 15. This theme entails the pathologizing of LGBTI+s as perverse and mentally ill, and the perpetuation of certain negative stereotypes including the preconception that LGBTI+ are oversexualised sexual deviants, hence, are highly likely infected with

HIV/AIDS (Sue 2010; Nadal et al., 2011). One example for this microaggression is provided by Participant 15, a lesbian woman working as a high school physical education teacher, detailing her colleagues' attitudes toward students believed to be LGBTI+:

> "The negative aspects come from the teachers. How do I put it? Well, they're biased, like 'This kid must be like that,' for example... When it comes to being gay, trans, and so on, teachers immediately, especially when the age average is a bit high, just jump to conclusions like 'This kid must be like that; let's send them to a psychologist.'" (32, MSc).

Out-group homogeneity is the sixth theme with 5 reported occurrences. This microaggression reflects an underlying belief that all LGBTI+ individuals and their experiences are the same (Nadal et al., 2011). Such assumptions are manifested in unwarranted comments made toward LGBTI+s physical appearance or abilities, as well as their emotional attributes. Accusatory undertones are also evident in circumstances where LGBTI+ individuals try to intervene in others' microaggression experiences. Much like others, this theme further serves to stigmatize sexual minorities by fitting them into various stereotypes. For one, Participant 8, a 23-year-old bisexual woman, reported having such an experience at her workplace:

> "Here's another experience. It was at the bar, in the early days... or rather, someone asked me something, like 'Your vibe is very lesbian.' 'Are you a lesbian?' and so on. (23, high school).

Another notable experience with this microaggression was described by Participant 1, where their attempt to defend a trans individual from being verbally harassed by their peers was halted by the aggressors accusing them of being 'one of them':

> "While I was in high school, there was a trans woman from another school near ours, and she was a student. There was a cafe where students from our schools used to gather. There, she started facing serious microaggressions. Questions like 'Are you a man or a woman?' or 'Do you engage in paid sex?' and more disgusting versions. I felt uncomfortable witnessing that, so I went

> up to that person and said, 'You can't talk like this. The person in front of you is a human being.' I said something like 'Don't do this,' and the person there, upon hearing me, confronted me with something like, 'Are you like that too, defending her? What are you trying to do?'" (27, non-binary, bisexual, MSc).

The seventh theme emerged as *benevolent heterosexism* and it refers to the dehumanisation and objectification experienced by the LGBTI+, wherein heterosexuals glamorise them into a fantastical and fabulous entities whose purpose is to elicit amusement and fascination (Nadal et al. 2011a). In the current study, participants outlined 5 accounts of the unreasonably positive manner in which heterosexuals referred to the LGBTI+, which undermine the uniqueness and nuance of their real personality. As recalled by Participant 3, an LGBTI+ and human rights activist, the discourse that the LGBTI+ are inherently good and infallible contributes to the stigmatisation of such individuals:

> "...actually, it's the whole thing about listing stereotypical things like, 'Oh, I really love gay people, they're so much fun,' and all that, but deep down, you know that even the worst gay person can be worse than someone who isn't gay. I mean, there's no good or bad in being gay; it's just like any ordinary person, we have all kinds among us. But these people, you know, try to compliment you with these micro things but at the same time, they stereotype you." (34, non-binary, bisexual, PhD).

The eighth and final theme, *sinfulness*, was the least occurring theme, with 2 accounts provided by one participant. This theme entails the religious views that LGBTI+s are intrinsically sinful and depraved individuals who are deserving of punishment (Sue 2010, Platt & Lenzen, 2013). One such experience is outlined by Participant 13, who described the dormitory manager's consternation at his gender affirming surgery. In the participant's narration, the manager's religious background was highlighted to account for his outrage at the participant's operation. He explained that there is a verse in the Qur'an, which states that God has created

everything as it is and changes in one's body are only allowed under medical circumstances, which has been taken out of context by conservatives to mean that undergoing gender affirming surgery is going against the will of God, hence, is a sin. In the participant's own words:

> "There's this guy, the manager, called Veli. This guy is a complete religious fanatic. Now, everyone is a Muslim; I'm a Muslim too, but I don't have taboos like worshiping blindly, and I question a lot of truths actually. He's like that. Someone complained about me, saying that I changed my gender. I had chest surgery, you know, last semester. Back then, the vice principal supported me. She even discharged me. At that time, I didn't have a car or anything. She made some essential trips for me with her car. The principal told her, 'She's had surgery and changed her gender.' What nonsense is this?" (24, trans man, high school).

Participants' responses indicate that microaggressions are experienced in a variety of ways. Hence, they were inquired about their perceptions of the aggressors' purposefulness and intentionality regarding the perpetration of microaggressions.

3.1.3 Purpose and Intentionality of Aggressors

Based on their own experiences, participants' perceptions of the purposefulness of aggressors in committing microaggressions, were reported as follows. Many argued that the aggressor did not have any purpose while perpetrating microaggressive acts (35.71%). While some reported that the purpose of the aggressors, especially those that were friends of the participants, was to joke around (21.43%), others have argued that their aggressors were projecting their own frustrations to them, which they argued as stemming from internalised homophobia (14.29%). One person said that their aggressor's purpose was to protect heteronormativity (7.14%). Another said their purpose was to force the participant to come out (7.14%), while the remaining two did not know (7.14%) or did not give a statement on this topic (7.14%).

Despite many reports that the aggressor did not have a purpose, a majority of participants believed the microaggressive acts to be intentional (60%). This was contrasted by some who thought their aggressors' actions were unintentional (20%), and some who were not able to gauge the intentionality of the aggressor (13.33%), while one did not give a statement on the intentionality of the aggressor (6.67%).

3.1.4 Emotional Outcomes of Microaggressions

When asked about the emotions experienced as a result of microaggressions, participants outlined 22 different emotions. The most common emotion felt by participants was sadness and disappointment (27.27%), followed by anger and frustration (22.73%), and feelings of alienation (13.64%). Participants also reported feeling oppressed (4.55%), alone (4.55%), shocked (4.55%), exoticized (4.55%), and uncomfortable (4.55%), as well as being filled with shame (4.55%) due to their experiences with microaggressions.

3.1.5 Participant Reactions to Microaggressions

There were nineteen instances of participants reacting to microaggressions. In 7 experiences, participants reported having reacted to the aggressor by educating them, either about the LGBTI+ perspective and/or how their actions may be harmful to marginalised people (36.84%). Likewise, in 6 of the instances, they reacted by verbally responding to the aggressor by warning them and/or fighting against them (31.57%). In 4 cases, participants preferred to treat the microaggressive acts as a joke and went along with them (21.05%), while one person reported showing their reaction by giving the aggressor disapproving looks (5.26%). In one instance, the participant simply froze and could not gauge how to react due to the shock of the experience (5.26%).

3.2 Microaffirmations

3.2.1 Microaffirmation Experiences

Following participants' accounts of microaggressions, their experiences with microaffirmations were inquired about. The results of the thematic content analysis revealed 44 instances of microaffirmations. In addition, percentages of who the supporters were, and the emotional outcomes of microaffirmations were calculated and categorised in terms of their frequency. This part of the analysis revealed that of those 44 instances, microaffirmations were mainly offered by friends (22.73%), family (13.64%), acquaintances (13.64%), teachers (13.64%), strangers (13.64%), and romantic partners (9.10%), while some could not be determined due to general accounts provided by participants (9.10%). One participant reported a microaffirmation experience with her students (2.27%), while another with her LGBTI+ friend (2.27%).

3.2.2 Microaffirmation Themes

7 themes related to microaffirmations emerged from participants' responses. These were acknowledgement, social support, affirming environment, solidarity/sense of community, encouragement, allyship, and peer normalisation. Three themes, social support, community belonging, and peer normalisation were entirely concurrent with the Flanders et al. (2016) study, while the remaining themes were either reconceptualizations of previously discovered themes or were novel themes emerging from the responses (see table 4 for details). The commonalities and differences are discussed in the next chapter.

Table 4: Microaffirmation Themes

No.	Theme	Freq.	%	Description and initial codes
1	Acknowledgement	11	25%	-Recognition and validation of LGBTI+ experiences and identities -Acknowledgement of existence and contributions to social domains -Conveying of respect and appreciation
2	Social Support	9	20.45%	-Small gestures that communicate care and understanding (verbal/non-verbal) -Assistance, encouragement, active listening, and support -From friends, family, and partners
3	Affirming Environment	8	18.18%	-Inclusive space, free from discrimination -LGBTI+s can be their authentic self -Discussions of LGBTI+ experience
4	Solidarity/Sense of Community	7	15.91%	-In-group togetherness -Actively standing with others -Working toward common goals -Social clubs, pride parades, activist associations
5	Encouragement	4	9.10%	-Interpersonal -Expressions of positive and supportive statements -Direct assertion and declaration of validation (verbal)
6	Allyship	3	6.82%	-From out-group members -Expressions of solidarity and support -Active intervention in discriminatory behaviour -Commitment to the fostering of respectful environment
7	Peer normalisation	2	4.55%	-Peer normalisation of LGBTI+ -Promotion of equal treatment, integration, acceptance, and participation of LGBTI+ -Feelings of being valued and included
Total		44	100%	

The initial and most prominent theme of *acknowledgement* appeared 12 times in participants' responses. This theme entails the recognition and validation of LGBTI+ experiences, identities and the acknowledgement of their existence and contributions in interpersonal contexts. Such microaffirmations convey respect and appreciation through small, everyday gestures. In this theme, participants referred to being accepted by friends without the need to come out, their parents' acceptance and even appreciation of their same-sex relationships, their instructors' sensitivity toward their pronouns, and so on.

Participant 13, recounted one such instance of this microaffirmation, where he felt his gender identity was recognised and validated by his mother's presence with him on the beach:

> "I go into the sea now, topless, just like a man. Because that's who I am. I don't have breasts because of the surgery. We went to the sea together, sunbathed; for instance, and I'm like that, and she got used to it." (24, trans man, high school).

Similarly, Participant 10, shared her feelings of acknowledgement resulting from the compliments of friends and strangers alike on her bravery in being herself:

> "So, I'm a bit, well, not too affected, and I move around very comfortably. My friends always, even people I don't know say, 'Such a brave kid,' and this sentence boosts my self-confidence even more, and I become more at ease. I say, 'Who cares?'. That word 'brave' can change everything for me—my self-confidence, everything." (20, trans woman, high school).

The second most notable theme, social support, consisted of 10 experiences offered by participants. This is when interpersonal relationships, such as friends, family, and partners provide small gestures that communicate care and understanding, such as offering assistance, encouragement, active listening, friendship and support to LGBTI+s. Some examples expressed by participants consisted of watching LGBTI+ related movies with family members, receiving consolidation from friends in cases of microaggressions, allocating monetary or temporal resources for gender affirming operations, etc. For instance, Participant 15 offered an example where she was supported by her friend when she came out to him:

> "I have a friend. When I told them about myself, they said, 'For me, it's not about your sexual orientation, but our situation, our friendship. Being there for each other. You can be there for me with one phone call, and I can be there for you. That's what matters to me.'" (32, lesbian woman, MSc).

In the same vein, Participant 9 outlined the ease of receiving support from her friends after experiencing a microaggression:

> "But in my comfort zone, here with my friends, if someone says something bad to me as they pass by, for example, I can easily come here and say, 'Bro, someone said this to me when passing by, it was very offensive, and it made me feel bad,' and share it comfortably. I mean, this kind of sharing, as a comfort mechanism, positively affects my social, um, comfort zone" (24, bisexual woman, university).

Affirming environment, the third theme consisting of 7 accounts, refers to spaces that have a safe, welcoming, and inclusive climate that is free from discrimination. In such spaces, individuals can be their authentic self without fear of stigmatization and openly discuss issues related to being LGBTI+ with their friends, coworkers, family members, etc. To give an example, Participant 2 expressed his contentment with moving to a larger city in which he could be himself and those around him could get to know him as his authentic self:

> "I come from a village. That's why... Actually, coming to Famagusta was my goal, like, 'Let me get away from here. Let me go and build a life where I can live my identity somewhere else,' so I moved here. That's why I love Famagusta a lot. It's much safer for me. When I came here, I didn't know anyone. So, when I arrived, they got to know the real me. I'm comfortable because they met me as I am. Everyone here already knows me this way, there's a sense of security that comes with that." (22, bisexual man, high school).

Another illustration of environmental affirmation was offered by Participant 8, who described the safe and accepting climate of a bar called ‘Hoi Polloi’ where the after party of a pride event was held:

> "It was really nice, for example, the walk to Hoi. Even in Hoi, the party and the after-party were great. No one interferes with anyone; it's very comfortable. No one looks at you and thinks, 'What is this person doing?' or says things like 'Why did they wear that outfit?' or 'Why so much?' among themselves." (23, bisexual woman, high school).

The fourth theme, *solidarity/sense of community*, emerged 7 times in participants responses. This theme refers to a sense of togetherness, actively standing with others, and working toward common goals with other LGBTI+s. Many participants reported experiencing this inter-group microaffirmation via social clubs, pride parades, educational institutions, and activist associations. One remarkable account for this theme is offered by Participant 12, a lesbian woman working as a middle and high school music teacher. In her high school years, during a trip planned by her school, she felt a sense of belonging and togetherness with her LGBTI+ friend, initially through unintentional actions, then intentional comments and support. In her own words:

> "While secretly smoking behind the tree, I saw a close male friend of mine holding hands with another foreign guy, and they were coming towards me. He didn't see me. Then I saw them kissing, and I said, 'Ah, so I'm not alone. My feelings are normal. There are other people.' And that's when I first opened up to him... We hugged, cried, and he told me, 'I've known for so many years; this is how I live. I struggled a lot too, but now we're together. You're not alone. Look, there's this, there's that,' and introduced me to people who are actually like us." (34, MSc).

Another account was offered by Participant 4, where he was invited to join his friend for attending the pride parade despite not being out at the time:

> "I hadn't come out to a friend yet, and they started talking to me about how important Pride is, maybe sensing something or perhaps having similar feelings themselves. They said they would definitely attend Pride and even suggested that I should come too. In that moment, I felt understood." (27, pansexual man, MSc).

Encouragement represents interpersonal expressions of positive and supportive statements that serve to validate LGBTI+ identity, experiences, or contributions in social domains. This microaffirmation carries a significant impact in fostering a sense of validation through assertion and declaration rather than passive recognition,

as is the case in the theme *acknowledgement.* Hence, *encouragement* entails the direct and purposeful actions of those who wish to validate the LGBTI+. Accounts of this microaffirmation was offered by 4 participants and included the use of gender affirming compliments and treatment by others. One striking example was recounted by Participant 10, a trans woman, who described the affirming impact of being complimented by other women:

> "For instance, when some friends say things like 'You're more beautiful than me,' it has a greater impact on me in this regard... It makes me happy, and my self-confidence increases a lot. Because I want to be a woman and hearing the phrase 'You're more beautiful than me' from another woman boosts my self-confidence. Of course, I'm not trying to compete with her, but still, that sentence, I won't say it's my goal, but since I'm already on the path to becoming a woman, I feel and behave like this, and being compared by another woman really doesn't make me feel different there. I can be very comfortable around them. When I feel like a woman around them, there's no barrier in front of me." (20, high school).

Comparably, Participant 6 shared his affirming experience with being complimented by strangers on the street:

> "There was this one time when I was walking on the street, or rather, walking in school, and people stopped me, saying 'You have amazing makeup' and so on. At that moment, I felt extremely good. Because even though you may think you don't need external validation, after receiving such positive energy, you feel like 'Oh yes, I'm not weird,' 'This is a beautiful thing.'" (22, gay man, high school).

The sixth theme was *allyship*, which appeared 3 times in participants' responses. This theme encompasses public expressions of solidarity and support for the LGBTI+ by heterosexual individuals. Allyship is conveyed through active intervention in discriminatory behaviour and comments, which demonstrate a commitment to fostering a respectful environment for all. In this microaffirmation, allies may address inappropriate remarks, questions, or jokes and warn the aggressor against making such statements. An example for this sort of microaffirmation was

recounted by Participant 1, who outlined their instructor's promptness and decisiveness in removing a student from class for making discriminatory comments:

> "In the introduction to psychology class, we discussed sexual orientation and gender identity, and someone actually tried to engage in hate speech. The teacher removed them from the class. I was in shock, like 'Isn't this Cyprus?' I mean, 'You didn't need to remove me from the class? You removed them?' and so on." (27, non-binary, bisexual, MSc).

In another similar incident, Participant 13 described his mother's reaction to someone deadnaming them:

> "For instance, when a friend came here during the summer and called me 'Ayşe,' she pulled them aside, warned them, and said, 'Call them Baran.'" (24, trans man, high school).

The least occurring theme of *peer normalisation* was recounted 3 times and involve actions that actively promoted the equal treatment, integration, acceptance, and participation of individuals in various social contexts, such as peer socialization, classroom environments, family gatherings, etc. For LGBTI+s, microaffirmations within this theme contribute to feelings of being valued, included, and no different from any other member of society.

For instance, Participant 5 recalled a general climate of normalisation and equal treatment in their childhood neighbourhood setting, which made them feel included and as part of the group:

> "For instance, there's a place I've lived since childhood in Ankara. I had many male friends there. None of them ever engaged in behaviour like making advances or saying inappropriate things to me. Because I grew up with them. Those who grew up with me already thought like, 'Oh, this is him' or I don't know, they were probably talking amongst themselves in their own way." (25, non-binary, attracted to men, Bachelor's).

Participant 2 also recounted experiences of being treated normally in social settings regardless of his sexual orientation:

> "People tend to approach more positively. This is probably because, before revealing my sexual orientation, I engage in conversation directly, as, well, if they haven't told me 'I am heterosexual,' I'm not going to go and say 'I am bisexual.' I just slip it into the conversation, like when talking about having a boyfriend, and the conversation naturally turns from there. But no one judges. We just continue as it is." (23, bisexual man, high school).

3.2.3 Emotional Outcomes of Microaffirmations

In contrast to microaggressions, many of the participants reported feeling good as a result of microaffirmations (42.86%). Some reported feeling normal (28.57%), happy (21.43%), safe and comfortable (35.71%), confident (14.29%), welcome (7.14%), proud (7.14%), and encouraged (14.29%), while some reported feeling a sense of unity and support (14.29%) as elicited by the micro affirmative actions of others.

3.3 Bystanders

3.3.1 Bystander Reactions

Participants were further inquired about the reactions of bystanders during instances of microaggressions. Through a thematic analysis, it was revealed that participants described 21 responses given to microaggressions. These responses are reported in order of most occurring to least occurring. An examination of bystanders' reactions, from most participants' accounts, indicated a tendency to go along with the microaggression (28.57%) through giggling and laughing, and by treating it as a joke. In addition, it was also observed that during microaggressions, bystanders tended not to react at all (23.81%). The number of instances where bystanders undervalued the microaggression by dismissing the situation or causing secondary victimization (14.29%) was equal to the number of times where bystanders immediately responded to the aggressor by insulting or shutting them down

(14.29%). In two instances, bystanders reacted to the microaggression by supporting the target through expressions of frustration and disapproval (9.52%). In one incident, a bystander reacted to the aggressor by warning them and bringing attention to the discomfort they may be causing the target (4.76%; P4), while in another incident, the parents had to intervene in the cumulation of microaggressions experienced by Participant 5 and have the aggressor expelled from school (4.76%).

3.3.2 Explanations for Bystanders' Inaction

When asked about their perceptions of why bystanders were unreactive, participants outlined 16 explanations to account for bystanders' inaction during instances of microaggressions. The explanations are presented from most commonly cited to least. The most cited reason was a likely adherence to heteronormative ideology (31.25%). As argued by some, said bystanders are highly likely to be prejudiced against the LGBTI+ themselves. Lack of empathy was cited by 18.75% of participants, who argued that bystanders were generally not aware of the harmful consequences of microaggressions they witness. Equally, it was suggested that bystanders may refrain from intervening during instances of microaggressions due to a fear of being categorized as LGBTI+ themselves (18.75%). Similarly, Participant 11 recounted an instance where she failed to address the discriminatory remarks of a group of aggressors as she was afraid of being outed and discriminated against herself. Another participant suggested that personal characteristics of some aggressors may contribute to the hesitancy of bystanders to intervene in some cases (6.25%), while Participant 12 described her tendency to immediately respond to aggressors before any bystander had a chance to intervene.

3.3.3 Expectations from Bystanders

In the final section of the interviews, participants were asked to describe their expectations from bystanders in response to microaggressions. A total of 43 statements were made on participants' expectations of bystanders during instances of microaggressions (see table 5). Likewise, their responses are in order of most expected to least.

Table 5: Expectations from Bystanders

No.	Theme	Freq.	%	Description
1	Warning the Aggressor	12	27.91%	-Warning the aggressor against making discriminatory statements, jokes, and actions toward the LGBTI+
2	Validating and Supporting the Target	8	18.60%	-Validating the experiences of LGBTI+ -Through gestures and actions that communicate care and understanding
3	Educating the Aggressor	6	13.95%	-Educating aggressors about LGBTI+ experience and perspective -Explaining harmful consequences of discriminatory remarks and actions
4	Immediate Response	5	11.63%	-Immediately responding to aggressor following a microaggression
5	Contextual Evaluation	5	11.63%	-Bystanders should form their reactions based on contextual information -Who is the target? -Who is the aggressor? -What is the setting? -How dangerous is defending the target?
6	Raising Awareness	4	9.30%	-Increasing awareness on LGBTI+ issues and microaggressions at the societal level
7	Role Modelling for other Bystanders	3	6.98%	-Setting an example for other bystanders by appropriately responding to and shutting down aggressors
Total		43	100%	

Many of these expectations were comprised of the bystander *warning the aggressor* and were stated by almost all participants in 10 statements (27.91%). As suggested by Participant 11:

> "They should clearly express their opinion that their behaviour is wrong." (50, lesbian, woman, PhD).

In 8 statements (18.60%), participants also asserted that bystanders should *validate and support* the target following an experience of microaggression. As stated by Participant 1:

> "However, in my ideal scenario, I think the person witnessing this microaggression should approach them and say, 'Are you okay?' or 'I don't share the same opinion, but I'm here for you.' Making this clear is a crucial factor." (27, bisexual man, MSc).

Educating the aggressor appeared in 6 of the statements (13.95%). Participant 13 described his ability to deter a friend from committing microaggressions through interpersonal contact. In his own words:

> "However, I have a friend now, who is currently my closest friend. He had never formed a friendship with a trans person before and was very religious. Initially, he had his reservations about this situation. Later on, by observing me and realizing that I am a good person, he understood that it had no impact on our friendship. He recognized that this was entirely my private life, that we didn't have a special relationship, and even if we did, it's just a very ordinary thing. He genuinely understood this by building a connection with me and, during this process, never disrespected me. If he had shown disrespect, this bond wouldn't have continued. He wouldn't have had the chance to learn because I wouldn't have communicated." (24, trans man, high school).

The importance of an *immediate response* was further highlighted in 5 statements by participants (11.63%), most notably, by Participant 15:

> "I believe that one should be very straightforward. By straightforward, I mean expressing what one feels at that moment openly to the person. Because, in my opinion, if you bottle it up and start questioning yourself later, you'll start facing problems. But the more straightforward you are with that person, the more honest you show yourself, and when they provide feedback, positive or negative, they will understand either that they should do it again or not. It's about feedback. I believe you should respond promptly." (32, lesbian woman, MSc).

Some underlined the critical role of *contextual evaluation* regarding potential reactions to microaggressions in 5 statements (11.63%), as they noted the danger of escalating such instances. According to Participant11:

> "Of course, it can vary depending on the situation. If there is a very serious issue, they might remain neutral, perhaps thinking about their safety. Thinking about everyone's safety. I don't know, it's necessary to look at it on a case-by-case basis." (50, lesbian woman, PhD).

Raising awareness on LGBTI+ issues, especially regarding prejudice and microaggressions, has been suggested in 4 statements (9.30%). One notable statement from Participant 4 details:

> "On a larger scale, of course, people need to realize how important this issue is and how destructive its effects can be. How? Well, through education. For example, the education individuals receive, you know, up until high school, or even university. It's something everyone can do. At least in one period of their lives, there should be awareness work about discrimination and marginalization faced by the LGBTI+ community. It could be a semester or something. They need to engage with studies related to gender issues so that they can understand the destructive effects of this issue. I believe it's important for them to realize that something that starts with small microaggressions can lead someone to suicide or receiving wrong treatments or even make them lose hope in life, even if just a bit." (27, pansexual man, MSc).

Some of those who argued that aggressors should be warned and immediately responded to by those witnessing the microaggression, further suggested that such bystanders, even those who belong to the LGBTI+ should set an example by *role modelling for other bystanders* through their actions. This suggestion was offered in 3 different statements by participants (6.98%). Participant 7 elaborated on this statement:

> "I become the subject and defend myself. Perhaps, in doing so, I set an example for the person next to me in terms of self-defence. But do I defend them? I'm not sure. I can be an example for them by defending myself." (30, gay man, Bachelor's).

Participant 1 also described how bystanders can be an example for others through their warning of the aggressor:

> "So, in some situations, it's crucial to say to the person committing the microaggression, 'No, what you're doing is wrong.' This is important for the other remaining bystanders to see and for them not to accept or internalize it." (27, bisexual man, MSc).

It is apparent from the responses of the participants that bystanders should be cognizant of microaggressions, be prepared to promptly stop their occurrence, depending on the context, and possess the necessary skills and knowledge to prevent such incidents.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION

Microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional, discriminatory remarks or actions that serve to ostracise the LGBTI+ based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Such behaviours contribute to the dissemination of stereotypes and perpetuate a sense of inequality and disparity in already marginalised individuals. The hostile climate of such environments is detrimental to the well-being of individuals, as the seemingly minor slights may have cumulative effects on the LGBTI+'s sense of belonging and foster a general culture of social exclusion. On the contrary, microaffirmations are small acts or expressions of understanding, care, and support, which serve to counteract the negative impact of microaggressions. For the LGBTI+ community, microaffirmations may be powerful in promoting resilience and inclusivity. Bystanders have a crucial role in this dynamic, as they can either contribute to the perpetration of microaggressions or interrupt them and offer microaffirmations to the target. Such interventions from bystanders can not only combat discriminatory actions, but also promote the establishment of inclusive and safe spaces where microaffirmations are commonly used, eventually contributing to an accepting and respectful community. In this context, since there are no known investigations of such experiences in the northern part of Cyprus, the current study sought to explore the microaggression and microaffirmation experiences of LGBTI+s residing in the northern part of Cyprus, their behavioral and emotional responses to such experiences, and their expectations from bystanders during instances of

microaggressions. In addition, an investigation was made to determine if previously identified themes were apparent in the context of Cyprus, and whether novel themes would emerge from this sample. While the deductive component of the analysis confirmed the existence of pre-established themes, the inductive approach did not yield any emerging themes specific to the north of Cyprus.

4.1 Microaggressions

In the present study, 8 distinct microaggression experiences were identified. These included hostile discrimination, compulsory heterosexuality and masculinity/femininity, modern and symbolic discrimination, heteronormative culture and politics, abnormality, out-group homogeneity, benevolent heterosexism, and sinfulness. The experiences outlined in these themes are consistent with those outlined by previous research, including Sue (2010), Nadal et al. (2011), and Platt and Lenzen (2013), and indicate that LGBTI+s residing in the northern part of Cyprus, are subject to numerous prevalent microaggressions. The inductive component of the analysis illustrated that the themes emerging from the current study had commonalities with themes identified by previous research. In addition, themes identified by previous research have shown to exhibit relative variations in their content and have been labelled by varying definitions. The theme hostile discrimination was consolidated from the homophobia theme identified by Sue (2010) and Platt and Lenzen (2013), and the discomfort/disapproval of LGBT experience and threatening behaviours themes proposed by Nadal et al. (2011). Furthermore, the heterosexist language/terminology theme identified by all three studies has also been included as part of hostile discrimination, as participants' accounts of such microaggressions did not merely result from homophobia or an irrational fear of the LGBTI+, as argued by Sue (2010). The second theme of

compulsory heterosexuality and masculinity femininity is a recategorization of the heteronormative culture and behaviour (Sue, 2010), and endorsement of heteronormative culture (Nadal et al., 2011; Platt & Lenzen, 2013) themes. Heteronormative culture and politics is similarly derived from heteronormative culture and behaviour (Sue, 2010), and endorsement of heteronormative culture (Nadal et al., 2011; Platt & Lenzen, 2013). However, distinctive from compulsory heterosexuality and masculinity/femininity, heteronormative culture and politics occurs at the societal or institutional level. Subsequently, the modern and symbolic discrimination theme was reframed to encompass the themes of denial of heterosexism (Sue, 2010; Nadal et al., 2011) and microaggressions as humour (Platt & Lenzen, 2013), as they reflect a modernised, less hostile means of discriminating against the LGBTI+. The abnormality theme is entirely parallel to Sue (2010)'s abnormality, and Nadal et al. (2011)'s assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality themes and is categorised as such, while benevolent heterosexism is a reconceptualization of the theme exoticisation, categorised by Nadal et al. (2011), and reflects a subtle, more positive form of prejudice against the LGBTI+. Similarly, sinfulness is the final theme which is entirely concurrent with Sue (2010) and Platt and Lenzen (2013)'s categorisations and is titled correspondingly.

To return to the findings of the present study, an examination of participants encounters indicated an abundance of microaggression experiences, specifically in the form of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. These experiences were reported by participants across diverse contexts (i.e., university, work, friendship) involving a variety of different people (i.e., close friends, family,

schoolmates, strangers), and occurring at various stages throughout their lives (i.e., childhood, high school years, work).

In the manifestation of hostile discrimination, most commonly, participants reported being subjected to outward expressions of homophobia and discomfort through dehumanising, heterosexist, and derogatory terminology, along with disapproving or hateful looks and comments. Such results are concurrent with previous research on LGBTI+ experiences in the context of Cyprus (West et al., 2014; Dürüst & Çağlar, 2015). In this microaggression, some were excluded from social groups and rejected by peers. Furthermore, this microaggression was almost exclusively observed in the form of microassaults, and were a manifestation of old-fashioned and traditional discrimination, comprised of attitudes founded in traditional cultural, religious, or moral beliefs which were evident in blatant expressions of dislike and hostility (McNevin, 2005; Morrison & Morrison, 2002; Sue et al., 2007; QCA, 2021). The hostile discrimination microaggression also relates to research on LGBTI+ youths' experiences with homophobic bullying that involves teasing, name-calling, and social exclusion (Basile et al., 2009).

The following two prominent microaggressions, compulsory heterosexuality and masculinity/femininity, and heteronormative culture and politics comprised of participants' descriptions of interpersonal interactions in which they were assumed to be heterosexuals and felt as if their sexual orientation or gender identity was denied, as argued by Herek (1992; 2000). In addition, LGBTI+s who were subject to this microaggression were expected to look and act like heterosexuals by others, which supports findings that heterosexuality is valued higher than LGTBI+ experiences, identities, and relationships (Clarke, 2012; Herek & McLemore, 2013). Likewise,

microaggressions related to heteronormative culture and politics were experienced as cultural and political messages of discriminatory attitudes and policies at the institutional level, which place a higher value on heterosexuality and heteronormativity and create a climate of hostility. The basis of these microaggressions are rooted in the same cultural beliefs that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality, as evident in the literature (Clarke, 2012; Herek & McLemore, 2013; Morrison & Morrison, 2002). In addition, experiences shared within the heteronormative culture and politics theme are in accordance with previous research which argued that broader concerns encompassing gender roles and gender identities that extend beyond the conventional understanding of these concepts in relation to heteronormativity. These concerns are also deeply ingrained in the culture of Northern Cyprus, where a traditional gender ideology is embraced, and a patriarchal societal and familial structure is the prevailing norm (Uluboy & Husnu, 2022).

LGBTI+s in the northern part of Cyprus were also subject to modern and symbolic discrimination, where the aggressors tended to deny their discriminatory remarks or behaviour by deflecting and masking their comments as jokes. The prominence of this microaggression highlights the shift toward more egalitarian norms as the manifestation of prejudice and discrimination becomes more indirect and indiscernible (Herek, 2000; Rostosky et al., 2009). Research shows that using humour is a frequent method of lessening the impact of certain messages (Trenholm, 2007), indicating that masking microaggressions as jokes provides the aggressor a level of immunity from taking responsibility for the negative impact of their comments. In this microaggression, LGBTI+s were sometimes oversexualised and

were subjected to homophobic jokes, especially from those in their friend group. In line with previous research, some have even expressed that such microaggressions coming from their close friends, despite being intended as humour, were the most hurtful, compared to jokes made by strangers (Balsam et al., 2011). These sorts of microaggressions are less conspicuous and represent more indiscernible ways of discriminating against the LGBTI+, as suggested by the literature (DiMarco et al., 2015; 2021). However, independently from old-fashioned discrimination, such contemporary means of discrimination reflect an underlying conviction that the demand for change is unwarranted as it is perceived that LGBTI+ discrimination has become obsolete, and that sexual minorities bring discrimination upon themselves by overly emphasising their sexual orientation and gender identity (Morrison & Morrison, 2002).

Abnormality-related experiences of microaggressions were also present in this study but to a lesser extent compared to the initial four themes. During these encounters, participants were exposed to remarks conveying the aggressors' convictions that LGBTI+ individuals are sick or sexually aberrant. The low salience of this microaggression within this sample suggests that the misguided notions associating LGBTI+s with mental illness or sexual deviance are not prevalent in the community. Another less prominent microaggression encountered by the LGBTI+ in Northern Cyprus was out-group homogeneity bias (Judd & Park, 1988; Park & Judd, 1990). This microaggression occurred when participants attempted to defend other LGBTI+s from being subject to microaggression perpetration wherein they were subsequently accused of being 'one of them', implying that being LGBTI+ is undesirable and inherently negative. Both themes reflect an underlying adherence to

essentialist thinking, initially proposed by Allport (1954). For instance, Rothbart and Taylor (1992) proposed that essentialist thinking entails an erroneous perception of social categories as "natural kinds," leading to the misrepresentation of socially and historically formed groups as comparable to biological species. Essentializing a social category is perceiving its members as having an unchangeable status that allows for numerous assumptions about them. To illustrate, an adherence to essentialist beliefs has been associated with higher sexual prejudice toward LGBTI+ (Haslam et al., 2002; Lytle et al., 2017).

Benevolent heterosexism, comprised of experiences where LGBTI+ individuals were exoticized, objectified and described in exorbitantly positive terms (Nadal et al., 2011a). This theme has been labelled as such since regardless of the positive terminology used, microaggressions within this theme serve to stigmatize and perpetuate stereotypes about the LGBTI+ community.

Sinfulness, reportedly the least occurring microaggression is rooted in religiosity, and entails the belief that LGBTI+ individuals are sinful and are deemed worthy of punishment. The relatively low rates of this microaggression suggests that prejudiced attitudes in the northern part of Cyprus, may not be entirely rooted in religiosity but rather might be attributed to other variables such as cultural norms, values, and attitudes salient in this community (Dürüst & Çağlar, 2015; Husnu & Mertan, 2017). Furthermore, the low salience of these themes reflect the changing manifestations of prejudice, from old-fashioned discrimination to a more modern and symbolic form of discrimination (DiMarco et al., 2015; Morrison & Morrison, 2002).

The finding that a substantial amount of microaggressions took place in high school middle school, and childhood, is consistent with previous research highlighting the prevalence of homophobic bullying among youths below university age (Basile et al., 2009; GLSEN, 2017; Kahle, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2012; Russell et al., 2014). Moreover, the prevalence of microaggressions in central aspects of life, regardless of age, as well as the emotional outcomes of such experiences supports Meyer (2003)'s minority stress model which set forth the notion that microaggressions are daily encounters with prejudice that may have cumulative adverse effects on LGBTI+.

4.1.1 Emotional and Behavioural Reactions to Microaggressions

Emotional outcomes of participants reflected that, as a result of microaggressions participants felt sadness and disappointment, anger and frustration, alienation, oppression, loneliness, shock, exoticized, uncomfortable, and shame. Feelings of sadness, disappointment, anger, and frustration were all present in other studies conducted on LGB individuals (Nadal et al. 2011b) and transgenders (Nadal et al. 2014). Further research has noted the negative impact of heterosexist and cisgenderist microaggressions on self-acceptance and psychological distress (Woodford et al., 2014).

Participants reacted to microaggressions in several different ways. While some confronted the aggressor directly by educating them on LGBTI+ issues and warning them verbally, some preferred to treat microaggressions as jokes and went along with the aggressors or gave them disapproving looks in response to their experiences. Direct confrontation with the aggressors were apparent in other studies (Nadal et al. 2011b; Nadal et al. 2014), the finding that some LGBTI+s go along with the aggressors jokes or questions is a novel finding in this study. As Sue (2010) argued,

LGTBI+ individuals must decide whether to respond to microaggressions based on several factors such as contextual evaluation, personal characteristics of the aggressor and personal characteristics and history of the person. In line with minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), such evaluations may cause mental exhaustion and emotional drainage for many LGTBI+ individuals which are added to stressor experienced as part of daily life. However, the fact that many participants responded to their aggressors by warning them and educating them, much like their expectations of bystanders, which demonstrates their resilience and determination in protecting their rights and dignity in the face of discrimination.

4.2 Microaffirmations

In the current study, 7 microaffirmation themes were present. These were acknowledgement, social support, affirming environment, solidarity/sense of community, encouragement, allyship, and peer normalisation. Participants' experiences with acknowledgement reflected the recognition, validation and acceptance of their sexual orientations and gender identities, as well as their contributions to social domains. Social support microaffirmations were described as small gestures that communicated care and understanding, such as active listening and assistance in gender affirming procedures, which were received from family, friends, and partners. Experiences outlined in this microaffirmations were consistent with those reported in Flanders et al. (2016). The affirming environment microaffirmation involved the presence of inclusive spaces that are free from discrimination in which LGBTI+s can be their authentic self and comfortably discuss issues related to being LGBTI+. Another microaffirmation consistent with Flanders et al. (2016)'s findings was solidarity/sense of community which represented in-group togetherness, actively standing with others, working toward common goals,

and participation in social clubs, pride parades, and activist associations for the participants in this sample. The microaffirmation of encouragement was expressed at an interpersonal level, and distinct from the acknowledgement and social support microaffirmations, involved expressions of positive, affirming, and validating statements that were verbally declared and asserted by others. Participants also recounted experiences with the allyship microaffirmation which involved expressions of solidarity and support, active intervention in discriminatory behaviour, and commitment to the fostering of respectful environments by those belonging to the out-group. Finally, the microaffirmation of peer normalisation represented experiences involving the promotion of equal treatment, integration, and acceptance, and social encounters where the LGBTI+ were made to feel normal, a finding that is concurrent with Flanders et al. (2016).

In terms of social support, the finding that interpersonal support from friends was more common than support from family is consistent with previous research on microaffirmations reporting that support from friends was more prevalent for LGBTI+ individuals compared to their heterosexual and cisgendered counterparts (Factor & Rothblum, 2007; Koken et al., 2009; Needham & Austin, 2010). Partner's support was also cited as validating, especially for gender identity of the transgender participants in the sample, as evidenced by previous research (Flanders et al. 2016; Pulice-Farrow et al. 2019).

4.2.1 Emotional and Behavioral Reactions to Microaffirmations

The emotional impact of microaffirmations, such as acknowledgement, led participants to feel good, normal, happy, safe, comfortable, confident, welcome, proud, encouraged, united, and supported. Such positive emotional outcomes of

microaffirmations are compatible with those discovered by previous research, such as feelings of validation, empowerment, encouragement and being welcome (Flanders et al., 2016; Koch et al., 2022, Pérez Huber et al., 2021; Sue et al., 2019). Emotional and cognitive outcomes of the acknowledgement microaffirmation, were consistent with findings that bisexual women feel validated and experience an increase in self-esteem (Flanders et al., 2016).

4.3 Bystanders

Participants' accounts of bystanders' reactions revealed that in most cases, bystanders tended to go along with the microaggression by treating it as a joke and laughing along with the aggressor. Some reported that bystanders did not react at all to instances of microaggressions, while others argued that bystanders undervalued the discriminatory actions of aggressors by dismissing the situation, and only in some cases they reacted by shutting the aggressor down and providing support to the target.

For bystanders who did not react to microaggressions, participants have offered explanations related with an adherence to heteronormative ideology, prejudice toward LGBTI+, a lack of empathy, a fear of being labelled as LGTBI+, a hesitancy to react that is caused by fear of retaliation by the aggressor, and in some cases, internalised homophobia, which corresponds to findings of previous research on the cultural framework of the Turkish speaking Cypriot community (Husnu & Mertan, 2017; Uluboy & Husnu, 2022) and homophobic bullying cases in the US (António et al., 2018; Meyer, 2001; Poteat & Vecho, 2016).

Concerning participants' expectations from bystanders during instances of microaggressions, almost all of them expected the bystanders to verbally warn the aggressors by informing them of the harmful consequences of their actions, some expected validation and support from the bystanders, some expected the bystanders to educate the aggressors on LGBTI+ experience and perspective, while others demanded immediate response from bystanders, and such expectations were in line with LGBTI+ expectations from bystanders discovered by (Scully & Rowe, 2009; Sue et al., 2019). The critical role of contextual evaluation before reacting was highlighted by some participants, and some argued that awareness on microaggressions and their negative impact on LGBTI+s must be raised. This finding is relevant to bullying research which argued that several factors were influential in bystanders' intentionality to intervene in such incidents, such as peer familiarity (Dessel et al., 2017; Poteat & Vecho, 2016). Participants who suggested that bystanders should warn the aggressors further argued that such bystanders should set an example for others through their support of the LGBTI+.

4.4 Limitations

As in any research, the present study had a few notable limitations. One such limitation is related to the sample and the potential lack of sufficient variety in participants' gender identities. Although non-binary and trans individuals were present in the sample, only two people identified as non-binary, while another two identified as trans. The remaining ten people identified as either male or female. This implies that the findings of this research may not be applicable to all non-binary and trans individuals residing in Northern Cyprus. Furthermore, it is unknown whether there are any intersectionality effects in our sample as the participants were made up of relatively young, Turkish speaking LGBTI+s who were from somewhat similar

ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Although the findings were parallel to those discovered in other cultures, it may be beneficial to further examine the impact of intersectional identities on LGBTI+'s experiences of microaggressions and microaffirmations residing in the northern part of Cyprus.

4.5 Implications

4.5.1 Implications for Research

The current study has a number of implications for research. Firstly, it corroborates existing literature on discrimination against individuals who identify as LGBTI+ and its impact on them. The study further supports research on microaggressions experienced by other social groups. It is important to note that, as evidenced by the inductive component of analysis, there was a lack of emerging microaggression themes in the context of northern Cyprus, while themes identified by previous research were present. To explain, although an inductive approach to analysis was consistently employed throughout the study, the deductive component of analysis may have allowed for the better organization of pre-established themes while simultaneously restricting the perspective of the researchers in a way that prevented the identification of novel themes that may have been particular to the northern part of Cyprus. Ergo, more research is needed to determine whether this was specific to this sample, or whether new themes would emerge from a sample with different ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. Previous research has documented the negative impact of microaggressions on the psychological well-being of LGBTI+, while information on the positive effects of microaffirmations remain relatively scarce. Thus, future research may endeavor in examining the relationship between microaffirmations and psychological well-being. Future research can further examine the impact of microaggressions and microaffirmations

on LGBTI+ identity, their coping strategies, and daily life. The current research has identified several types of microaggressions perpetrated in various different forms in the context of a Turkish speaking culture, hence it can serve as a guide for the development of a quantitative measure of microaggressions, microaffirmations, and expectation from bystanders. Regarding LGBTI+s' ability to cope with and respond to microaggressions, and their reactions to microaffirmations, it is important for further research to consider the impact of identity status (i.e., comfortability with one's own gender identity), level of internalized homophobia, and appearance (i.e. perceived ability to pass as male or female for trans individuals). Given the intersectionality of LGBTI+s' identities, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, it is also advisable for future research to investigate how these many identities influence their encounters with microaggressions, coping mechanisms, and other pertinent variables. Finally, more research is necessary distinguish between homophobic bullying at the macro level and sexual orientation-based microaggressions, as this will aid in the development of interventions aimed at identifying and preventing such discriminatory behaviour.

4.5.2 Implications for Bystanders

This study also has significant ramifications for bystanders. Considering the widespread expectation for bystanders to address microaggressions promptly and assertively by warning or educating individuals about LGBTI+ issues, it is crucial to implement awareness campaigns that target such behaviour at the interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels. These efforts should aim to motivate bystanders to identify and prevent occurrences of microaggressions, not only targeting the LGBTI+ community, but also extending to other marginalized individuals residing in the northern part of Cyprus.

Explanations offered for bystanders' inaction during microaggression encounters were revealed as consequences of culturally coded norms and values by the sample in the current study. Since microaggressions can be exerted without the awareness of the perpetrator, it is essential to address the prevailing cultural norms in Northern Cyprus that are based on a heterosexist worldview and reinforce prejudices about LGBTI+ individuals to successfully eradicate the occurrence of microaggressions. In addition, the present findings pointed out that through their intervention, bystanders should set an example for others to step in during microaggressions, further highlighting the need for an increase in societal efforts to prevent this phenomenon. Furthermore, microaffirmations, and overall recognition and support of LGBTI+ should be promoted to all members of the community to establish a safer and more inclusive environment for LGBTI+ individuals to live peacefully as equal members of the society.

It was evident that numerous microaggressions occurred in educational settings, including middle schools, high schools, and universities. Therefore, it is crucial for these institutions, which serve as centers for education and socialization, to be inclusive of the LGBTI+ community and foster a conducive learning environment. In educational contexts, bystanders such as principals, teachers, counselors, staff, and fellow students should be educated about microaggressions to effectively identify biases in others and themselves and be taught how to be supportive allies of the LGBTI+ community. As evidenced by Poteat and Voche (2016), to decrease incidences of homophobic behaviour and foster a culture of respect and affirmation in schools, it is crucial to involve a greater number of students as active bystanders. To accomplish that bystanders must be trained in the recognition of microaggressions

so they can interpret the situation as requiring intervention (Scully & Rowe, 2009). Then, they must be encouraged to take responsibility for the intervention, which demands skill and knowledge on appropriate intervention strategies (Bennett et al., 2014; Latané & Darley, 1970; Nickerson et al., 2014). Hence, researchers and interventionists must prioritize addressing the significant number of students who witness this sort of conduct, identify the factors that may increase their inclination to intervene, and implement the appropriate programs.

The current research showcased the beneficial effects of microaffirmations on LGBTI+ individuals at the interpersonal level, with particular emphasis on the influence of family and acquaintances. Thus, the implementation of awareness campaigns can increase personal efforts to recognize biases and to counteract the negative impact of microaggressions through empathy and support. Previous research on inter-group contact between Turkish speaking Cypriots and Greek speaking Cypriots living in Cyprus indicates that even imagined contact with an out-group can be effective in reducing prejudice toward said group (Husnu & Crisp, 2010). Additionally, research shows that for adolescents, indirect contact through media can increase bystanders' intentions to intervene in homophobic bullying cases (McGuire et al., 2023). Moreover, having LGBTI+ friends has been associated with higher intentions to intervene in homophobic bullying cases (Poteat & Vecho, 2016). Especially in the context of north Cyprus, the findings that an increase in positive contact and friendships with the LGBTI+ predicted a decrease in negative attitudes emphasizes the necessity of facilitating contact between the general public and the LGTBI+ (Bagci et al., 2020; Piumatti & Salvati, 2020; QCA, 2021). Thus, intervention programs guided by this research can be designed and implemented with

the aim of increasing contact with the LGBTI+ community, which will undoubtedly contribute to bystanders' intentionality in intervening during LGBTI+ targeted microaggressions. In line with contact theory, considering that social identity plays a role in bullying dynamics whereby group identification may lead to prejudice and discrimination when aligned with the group norms, programs designed to tackle such behaviour, including microaggressions, especially toward the LGBTI+ communities in educational settings, can focus on creating a common or shared identity among peers while increasing contact between groups to diminish the emphasis on group differentiation.

4.6 Reflection

This qualitative study on the experiences of microaggression and microaffirmation among the LGBTI+ population living in northern Cyprus has provided me with a remarkable opportunity for personal growth and learning. Being part of the community, I had the opportunity to engage in conversations with fellow LGBT individuals and hear them recount their experiences, both positive and unpleasant. This was not only a pleasure for me but also a privilege. I was elated when approached by my supervisors to conduct my thesis in this particular field as I have been intrigued by the discourse surrounding microaggressions and microaffirmations since I first encountered such discussions in the popular media a few years ago. Throughout my life, I have faced various circumstances, received specific comments, and been exposed to several jokes and inquiries that were centered around my sexual orientation or gender expression. These encounters encompassed clear instances of bullying, which evolved into microaggressions as I grew older, and my social surroundings began to change. Prior to the start of the research, I did not know how to respond to such situations or what to anticipate from others in response to

microaggressions. During the interviews, I had the honour of listening to others' experiences. By hearing their accounts, I was able to reflect on my own experiences without imposing my convictions on the participants or the interpretation of results. I realised that my past experiences and emotions were largely similar to those of others. This has not only broadened my understanding of different perspectives, but also provided me with a sense of belonging, unity, and shared experiences. It is crucial to acknowledge that during each interview, the recognition of each individual's distinct history and background was prioritized, and no assumptions were made about any of the participants. The participants' willingness to engage in open and honest conversations, where they shared their deepest thoughts, emotions, and experiences, reinforced the importance of conducting qualitative research on these intricate phenomena. Several participants emphasized the significance of conducting this research, particularly in the northern region of Cyprus, and expressed their satisfaction in being able to engage in detailed discussions about their experiences with microaggressions and microaffirmations after the interviews were conducted. Personally, one of the most favorable outcomes for me was having the chance and ability to provide a platform for open dialogue on LGBTI+ matters and experiences, especially for those who were not able to openly express themselves within their social environment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Yarı-yapılandırılmış görüşme formu

Sosyo-demografik bilgiler

Yaşınız:

Eğitiminiz: Lısans mezunu yuksek lisans

Cinsel yöneliminiz:

Cinsiyet kimliğiniz:

Algılanan gelir düzeyiniz (sosyal sınıf):

Görüşme Soruları

1. Günlük yaşamımızda birçoğumuz dış görünüşümüz, kılık kıyafetimiz ya da kimliklerimiz nedeniyle olumsuz birtakım davranışlara maruz kalabiliyoruz. Doğrudan ya da açık bir biçimde olmasa da bir bakış, belki alaycı bir gülüş, belki sevimsiz bir şaka, vs., gibi ilk anda saldırganca gibi hissetmediğimiz fakat sonradan anladığımız veya o anda kötü hissetmemize yol açan daha örtük-mikro olumsuz tavırlara ya da davranışlara maruz kalabiliyoruz.

Siz hayatınızı genel olarak düşündüğünüzde cinsiyet kimliğiniz ya da cinsel yöneliminiz nedeniyle bu tür bir olumsuz tavra veya saldırganca bir davranışa maruz kaldınız mı? **Geçmişi hatırladığınızda çevrenizde başkalarının da bu olaya tanıklık ettiği, sizi en çok etkileyen/en iyi hatırladığınız yaşantıyı** paylaşır mısınız?

- **Ne** yaşadınız?
- **Ne zaman** yaşadınız?
- **Nerede** yaşadınız?
- **Kim ya da kimler tarafından** bu saldırganca davranışa maruz kaldınız?

- Bu olay sırasında **nasıl hissettiniz**?
- Siz **nasıl tepki verdiniz**?
- Bu olaya **tanıklık eden diğer kişiler kimlerdi**? (Tanıdık/yabancı?)
- **Nasıl tepki verdiler**? (Tepki verdiler ise ne yaptılar?)
- Tepkisiz kaldılar ise sizce **neden tepki vermemiş olabilirler**?
- Sizce bu yaşantıya maruz kalmanıza **sebep olan şey nedir**? Niçin başınıza böyle bir olay geldi?
- Size bu şekilde **davranan kişi ya da kişilerin amacı** neydi? Sizce niyetli bir şekilde mi bunu yaptılar?
- Genel olarak bu tür davranışlara maruz kalan birini gören veya **buna tanık olan diğer kişiler o anda ne yapmalıdır**?

2. Yaşamımızda bu tür olumsuz yaşantılar deneyimleyebileceğimiz gibi bazen de genel olarak nasıl yaşamak istiyorsak öyle var olabildiğimiz, saygı gördüğümüz, cinsiyet kimliğimizin ya da cinsel yönelimimizin sorgulanmadığı veya onaylandığı yaşantıları da deneyimliyoruz. Bu tür anlarda genellikle yalnız olmadığımızı hissediyor ve cesaretlendiriliyoruz. **Sizi bu şekilde olumlu etkileyen ve önemli bulduğunuz bir anı ya da deneyimi paylaşır mısınız**?

- **Ne** yaşadınız?
- **Ne zaman** yaşadınız?
- **Nerede** yaşadınız?
- Bu olay sırasında **nasıl hissettiniz**?

Appendix B: EMU's Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Board Approval Letter

3 May 2023

ETK00-2023-80

Dear Alım Sancar,

I am pleased to inform you that your ethics application for your project titled **Microaggressions and microaffirmations: LGBTI+'s experiences, perceptions, and expectations of bystanders' reactions** under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Şenel Hüsnü Raman & Assist. Prof. Dr. Pelin Karakuş Akalın has been approved and you can start data collection.

With all good wishes,

Prof. Dr. İlhan Raman

Chair, EMU Social Sciences, Humanities and Administration (SOBIB) Ethics Sub Committee