The Moderating Effect of Comfort from Companion Animals and Social Support on the Relationship between Microaggressions and Mental Health in LGBTQ+ Emerging Adults

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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

• Sexual and gender minority emerging adults (SGM; e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender identities, or LGBTQ+2) experience minorit"s trriers, such as microaggressions, that impact their mental health and well-being3-5.
• Microaggressions are unconscious behaviors or statements directed at members of marginalized groups that reflect a hostile or discriminatory message6;7.
• Exposure to microaggressions has been associated with psychological distress8;9, higher rates of depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress symptoms10,11; lower self-esteem and self-efficacy12,13; and negative perceptions of one’s own LGBTQ+ identity14.
• There is emerging evidence that social support may serve as a protective factor that buffers the relationship between SGM-related minorit"s trriers and negative mental health outcomes14,15, and that companion animals (e.g., dogs, cats) may serve as an important source of support for youth and emerging adults16,17.

Sample: 134 SGM emerging adults (aged between 18-21 years; M = 19.31 years) who had lived with a dog or cat within the past year, recruited through a partnership with five local community organizations.

METHODS

• lCQI Microaggressions on Campus Scale22: interpersonal (α =.90) and environmental (α =.71).
• Brief Symptom Inventory23, anxiety (α =.87) and depressive symptoms (α =.86).
• Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support24: overall social support (α =.86).
• Comfort from Companion Animals Scale22: emotional comfort from companion animals (α =.91).

Analysis Plan
• Simple moderation analyses: determine whether the association between each domain of microaggressions (interpersonal and environmental) and each mental health variable (anxiety and depressive symptoms) varies as a function of emotional comfort from companion animals or human social support (Figure 1A).
• Multiple moderation analyses: assess the degree to which the relationship between microaggressions and mental health varies as a function of emotional comfort from companion animals and human social support.

• Covariates: age, race/ethnicity (0=racial/ethnic minority, 1=White, non-Latinx), gender identity (0=cisgender, 1=gender minority), whether participation occurred before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (0=before, 1=after), and whether participant was the primary caregiver of their dog or cat in past year (0=no, 1=yes).

RESULTS

• Social support was a significant moderator of the relation between interpersonal and environmental microaggressions and depressive symptoms, when holding comfort from companion animals constant.
• Comfort from companion animals moderated relations between interpersonal microaggressions and depressive symptoms, when holding social support constant.
• As seen in Figure 3 and the table above, the relation between interpersonal microaggressions and depressive symptoms is significant for those reporting high levels of social support and medium and high levels of comfort from companion animals. The relation between environmental microaggressions and depressive symptoms was also significant at medium levels of social support and medium and high levels of comfort from companion animals.
• The relation between environmental microaggressions and depressive symptoms was significant at low levels of social support across all levels of comfort from companion animals. The effect of interpersonal or environmental microaggressions on depressive symptoms is not significant for those reporting high levels of social support, regardless of the level of comfort from companion animals received.

DISCUSSION

• Results indicate that human social support is a protective factor that mitigates the negative impact of microaggressions on depressive symptoms in SGM emerging adults.
• Emotional comfort from companion animals had an unexpected effect on relations between interpersonal microaggressions and depressive symptoms, in that the relationship was significant and positive at greater levels of comfort from companion animals.
• It is possible that companion animals may add stress that exacerbates the impact of interpersonal microaggressions on depressive symptoms.
• However, it is also possible that SGM emerging adults who have experienced microaggressions and depressive symptoms may seek out more interactions with companion animals to receive emotional comfort.
• Neither social support nor emotional comfort from pets moderated relations between microaggressions and anxiety symptoms – this suggests that the moderating effect of support from humans and companion animals may not extend to other mental health outcomes, like anxiety.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

• Due to our small sample size, we did not have sufficient power to detect small effect sizes and we were limited to dichotomizing demographic variables such as race/ethnicity and gender identity.
• Future research should include examinations of how these relationships may differ for those that hold multiple marginalized identities and experience co-occurring forms of microaggressions.
• This study did not explore more severe types of victimization (e.g., exposure to violence) stress associated with living with companion animals, or other forms of social support (e.g., community-based support).
• Future studies should investigate relations between other domains of social support, relationships with companion animals, and minority stressors and mental health.
• This study employed a cross-sectional design, thus limiting our ability to make causal inferences.
• Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the directionality of our results and clarify the unexpected effect of comfort from companion animals on mental health.

REFERENCES

Our acknowledgements and references can be found at: https://tinyurl.com/2021symposiumAM

You can find our manuscript at: Matijczak, A., McDonald, S. E., Tomlinson, C. A., Murphy, J. L., & O’Connor, K. (2020). The Moderating Effect of Comfort from Companion Animals and Social Support on the Relationship between Microaggressions and Mental Health in LGBTQ+ Emerging Adults. Behavioral Sciences, 10(1). https://doi.org/10.3390/bs10010001