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# 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+") experience minority stressors, such as microaggressions, that impact their mental health and wellbeing<sup>1-2</sup>.
- Microaggressions** are unconscious behaviors or statements directed at members of marginalized groups that reflect a hostile or discriminatory message<sup>3-7</sup>.
- Exposure to microaggressions has been associated with psychological distress<sup>2</sup>; higher rates of depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress symptoms<sup>8-10</sup>; lower self-esteem and self-efficacy<sup>11-13</sup>; and negative perceptions of one's own LGBTQ+ identity<sup>13</sup>.
- There is emerging evidence that **social support** may serve as a protective factor that buffers the relationship between SGM-related minority stressors and negative mental health outcomes<sup>14-16</sup>, and that **companion animals** (e.g., dogs, cats) may serve as an important source of support for youth and emerging adults<sup>17,18</sup>.

### Study Objectives:

- To test the moderating effect of emotional comfort derived from companion animals on the relationship between SGM-related microaggressions and depressive and anxiety symptoms (Figure 1A).
- To test whether, and to what extent, human social support moderates the relationship between microaggressions and depressive and anxiety symptoms (Figure 1B).
- To explore whether, and to what degree, the relationship between microaggressions and depressive and anxiety symptoms varies as a function of emotional comfort from companion animals and social support derived from humans, when holding the other moderator constant (Figure 1C).

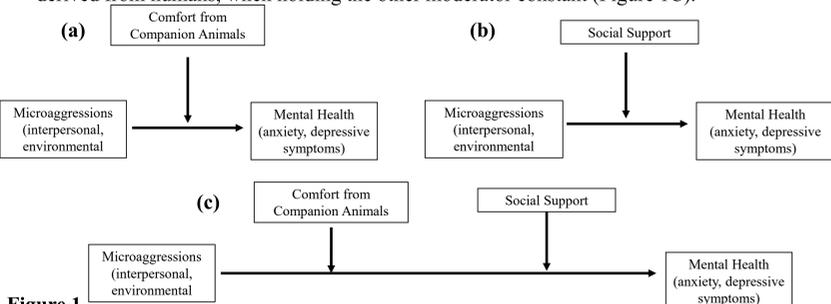
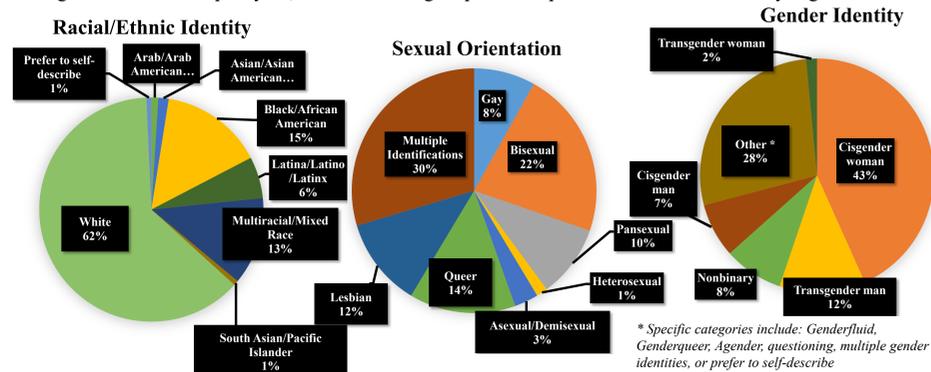


Figure 1

## METHODS

- 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.



### Measures

- LGBQ Microaggressions on Campus Scale<sup>19</sup>:** interpersonal ( $\alpha=.90$ ) and environmental microaggressions ( $\alpha=.71$ )
- Brief Symptom Inventory<sup>20</sup>:** anxiety ( $\alpha=.87$ ) and depressive symptoms ( $\alpha=.86$ )
- Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support<sup>21</sup>:** overall social support ( $\alpha=.86$ )
- Comfort from Companion Animals Scale<sup>22</sup>:** emotional comfort from companion animals ( $\alpha=.91$ )

### Analysis Plan

- 8 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 1 A&B).
- 4 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=no or after (1)), and whether participation was the primary caregiver of their dog or cat in past year (0=no, 1=yes).

## RESULTS

### Simple Moderation Analyses

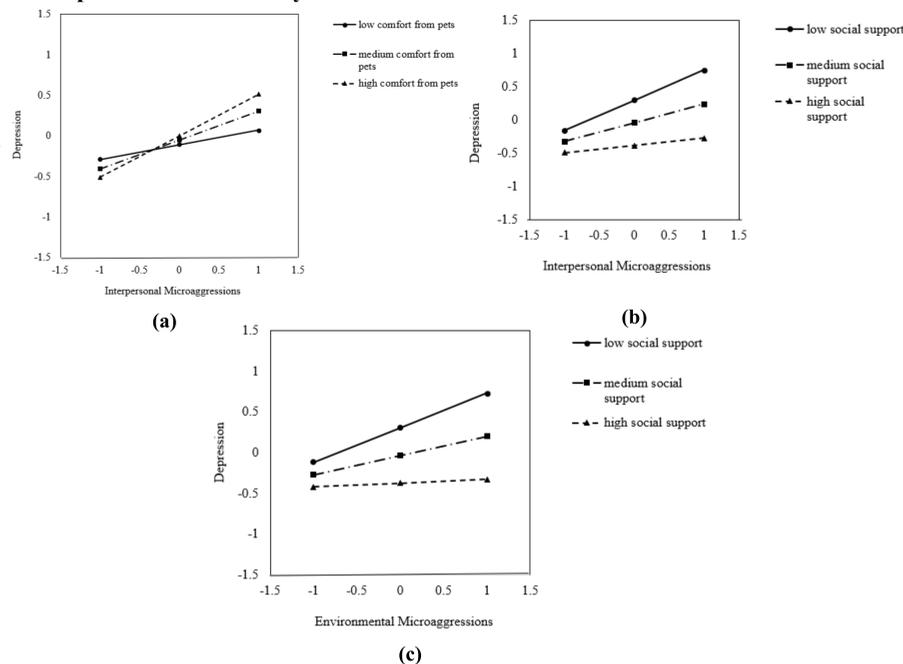


Figure 2. Significant conditional effects of simple moderation ( $n = 134$ ). (a) Conditional effect of interpersonal microaggressions on depressive symptoms as a function of comfort from companion animals; (b) conditional effect of interpersonal microaggressions on depressive symptoms as a function of social support; (c) conditional effect of environmental microaggressions on depressive symptoms as a function of social support. All the variables of interest were standardized.

- Comfort from companion animals moderated relations between interpersonal microaggressions and depressive symptoms ( $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(1, 125) = 4.78$ ,  $\beta = .18$ ,  $t(125) = 2.19$ ,  $p = .031$ ).
- As shown in Figure 2a, the relation was significant at **medium** ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $t(125) = 4.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and **high** levels of comfort from companion animals ( $\beta = .51$ ,  $t(125) = 4.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ).
- Social support moderated relations between interpersonal microaggressions and depressive symptoms ( $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(1, 125) = 4.74$ ,  $\beta = -0.17$ ,  $t(125) = -2.18$ ,  $p = .031$ ); the moderation effect of environmental microaggressions by social support on depressive symptoms approached significance ( $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(1, 124) = 3.93$ ,  $\beta = -0.19$ ,  $t(124) = -1.98$ ,  $p = .05$ ).
- As shown in Figure 2b and 2c, the relations were only significant at **low** levels of social support (int:  $\beta = .46$ ,  $t(125) = 3.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ; env:  $\beta = .43$ ,  $t(124) = 2.71$ ,  $p = .008$ ).
- Neither social support nor comfort from companion animals significantly moderated relations between either domain of microaggressions and anxiety symptoms.

### Multiple Moderation Analyses

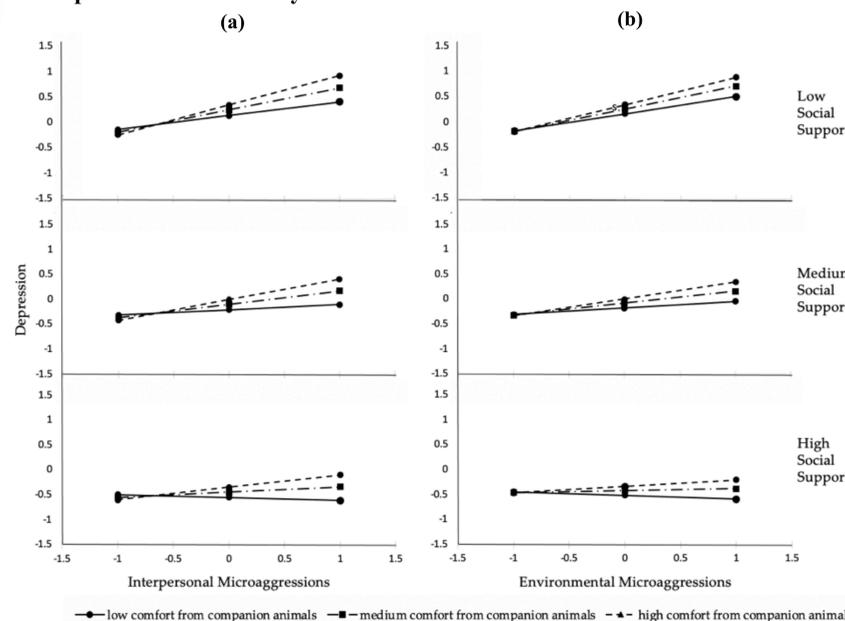


Figure 3. Conditional effects of multiple moderation analyses ( $n = 134$ ). (a) Conditional effect of interpersonal microaggressions on depressive symptoms as a function of social support and comfort from companion animals; (b) conditional effect of environmental microaggressions on depressive symptoms as a function of social support and comfort from companion animals. All the variables of interest were standardized.

## RESULTS - Multiple Moderation Analyses (Continued)

Variable	Social support	Comfort from Companion Animals	$\beta$	SE	t	p	95% CI	
							LL	UL
Interpersonal microaggressions x Depression	Low	Low	.27	.14	1.94	.05	-0.01	.55
		Medium	.44	.12	3.73	<.001	.21	.67
		High	.58	.13	4.34	<.001	.32	.85
	Medium	Low	.11	.11	.95	.35	-0.12	.33
		Medium	.27	.08	3.21	.002	.10	.44
		High	.42	.11	3.85	<.001	.20	.63
	High	Low	-.06	.13	-0.95	.66	-0.33	.21
		Medium	.10	.11	0.93	.35	-0.12	.33
		High	.25	.13	1.86	.06	-0.02	.51
Environmental microaggressions x Depression	Low	Low	.33	.16	2.10	.04	.02	.65
		Medium	.44	.15	2.86	.01	.14	.75
		High	.54	.18	2.97	.004	.18	.89
	Medium	Low	.13	.11	1.16	.25	-0.09	.35
		Medium	.24	.09	2.58	.01	.06	.42
		High	.33	.12	2.71	.01	.09	.58
	High	Low	-.07	.14	-0.53	.60	-0.35	.20
		Medium	.04	.11	.33	.74	-0.19	.26
		High	.13	.13	1.00	.32	-0.13	.39

Note. CI = confidence interval. LL = lower level. UL = upper level.

- 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 **low** levels of social support and **medium** and **high** levels of comfort from companion animals. The relation is 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 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 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, 11*(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs11010001>