



## UNVEILING MINORITY RESILIENCE: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF TRANS AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING EXPERIENCES IN SRI LANKA

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Gender identities and sexualities that diverge from the cis-gendered heterosexual majority experience systemic criminalization and societal stigmatization in Sri Lanka. Discrimination against the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual and/or Ally (LGBTQIA+) community contributes to the high rate of chronic stress, referred to as *minority stress*, a sociological non-clinical concept linked to severe mental health consequences, including suicidality. Meanwhile, both clinicians and LGBTQIA+ individuals note that positive attainable goals are not well understood, limiting the scope and effectiveness of psychological and charity interventions. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Trans and Gender Non-conforming (TGNC) individuals, through theory-informed interviews with fifteen participants representing diverse ethnicities and geographical locations across Sri Lanka. The interview structure is informed by the *Power Threat Meaning Framework* (PTMF), a co-productive diagnostic assessment approach that explores how individuals prescribe positive and negative meanings to distressing experiences. In the current context, this relates to minority stress and expressions of resilience specific to TGNC individuals. Discourse analysis was employed among six interviews to explore common narratives relating to the TGNC community, the wider LGBTQIA+ community, and mainstream society. A subsequent, data-driven thematic analysis ( $N = 9$ ) identified convergence and divergence from the initially established pattern. Preliminary findings suggest an adaptive balancing of complex viewpoints. Participants appear to view their position in society as accepted, compared to the wider LGBTQIA+ community, but this acceptance was conditional and dependent on societal contributions, adhering to a binary gender system. Interviewees navigated this through humour and optimism, yet trivializing accounts of violence against themselves, likely to manage their emotions. This study represents an advancement in positive psychology, offering an innovative data-informed theoretical concept called, *minority resilience*. It integrates a Western understanding of resilience with a collectivist cultural perspective and TGNC-specific emotional responses. The researchers anticipate these findings will be a starting point for policy changes and the development of interventions on an individual and community level, formulating positive goals informed by the lived experiences of the TGNC community in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: transgender; minority stress; resilience; LGBTQIA+, Sri Lanka

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### INTRODUCTION

Gender identities and sexualities that divert from the cis-gendered heterosexual norm are still criminalized and stigmatized in Sri Lanka. The rampant discrimination of the ‘Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual and/or Ally’ (LGBTQIA+) community is likely contribute to the high rates of suicidality within the Sri Lankan LGBTQIA+ community (e.g., Chandradasa, 2019; Jinadasa, Perera, Dissanayake, & Kuruwita, 2020) requiring an urgent paradigm shift. Due to the extreme marginalization of the LGBTQIA+ community, their psychosocial needs go unnoticed for long periods due to lack of research, clinician attention, and/or sole focus on negative psychosocial factors. Moreover, due to continuous life stressors such as neglect, maltreatment, abuse, trauma, stigma, and discrimination, they are more susceptible to developing serious psychological conditions (McGraw et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2020).

Additionally, emerging evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced and deepened the inequalities and marginalization impacting LGBTQIA+ communities (Herman & O’Neill, 2020; Pandya & Redcay, 2020; Poteat, Reisner, Miller, & Wirtz, 2020; van der Miesen, Raaijmakers, & van de Grift, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, the current project further analyzed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on LGBTQIA+ community-related stressors in Sri Lanka.

This phenomenon; the disproportionate adverse effects on a sub-section of society, due to discrimination, amongst other aspects, is referred to as “minority stress” (Meyer, 2003). Immediate efforts must be taken to identify protective factors relevant to the LGBTQIA+ community, and especially related to the transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) community that may effectively mitigate the risk of suicide because existing research about the TGNC community predominantly focuses on aforesaid minority stressors; negative aspects of the individuals’ experiences such as the rate of discrimination, victimization, and subsequent mental health issues (Bowling et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2021).

The objective of this study is to explore the risk and protective factors specific to the TGNC community in Sri Lanka. Notably, this research represents one of the pioneering efforts in the country to examine trauma-informed perspectives within the LGBTQIA+ community, with a particular emphasis on TGNC individuals. Furthermore, this study introduces and develops the concept of "minority resilience," addressing a significant gap in the existing literature. Given the scarcity of systematic research on resilience and protective factors within these populations in Sri Lanka, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities faced by TGNC individuals in this context.

### METHODOLOGY

Fifteen semi-structured interviews from TGNC individuals, representing diverse ethnicities and geographical locations across Sri Lanka were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview structure is informed by the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018), a



co-production diagnostic assessment approach that explores how individuals prescribe both positive and negative meanings to distressing experiences. This was first applied to the Trans experience by Henrich (2022). A subsequent study establishing preliminary care consensus amongst experts ( $N = 14$ ) confirmed this non-pathologizing approach as reflective of current approaches (Henrich, 2023). It was expected that the PTMF application would allow for the reflection of power dynamics, resulting in distress specific to this minority, such as internalized transphobia (i.e., distortion of self-concept due to external discrimination and victimization; Henrich, 2022). The present study employed discourse analysis (DA;  $n=6$ ) and thematic analysis (TA;  $n=9$ ) as proposed by Alejandro and Zhao (2023) to explore the nuanced realities and underlying themes within their narratives. The former allowed for the exploration of meaning and recognizes that this meaning is constructed in a social and societal context, thus, allowing for cultural reflections relevant to the investigated community (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The latter explored trends across the remaining data set to understand whether the DA was reflective of the wider group (Alejandro & Zhao, 2023). The research was conducted upon receiving ethical clearance from the Open University Ethics Review Committee (09/06/2022).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

DA results indicate that the TGNC community is viewing itself in a unique and likely isolated position within Sri Lanka. Investigating their relationship with the out-group, namely, the mainstream culture reveals a dichotomous relationship. Participants expressed their need to assimilate into mainstream culture (to be “normal”) and not stand out as visibly ‘Trans’. In this context, participants consistently mentioned that their status in society feels more secure than that of other LGBTQIA+ members, often attracting those members’ jealousy (as perceived by the Trans participants). However, the brittle state of acceptance (described as ‘being pitied’ or hollow gestures by trendy initiatives, e.g. ‘[...] I haven’t seen them acting based on providing equality or respect. They operate with the idea of feeling bad for us.’) was often narratively linked to trivializing their aversive experiences with the out-group (e.g., by using humor, laughing during the interview or negating the aversive effects on themselves in later stages of the interview). Thus, they admitted to living in constant fear, feeling shamed or shunned, but always either putting it into perspective or projecting their fears onto loved ones (e.g., needing to keep their family safe by isolating, instead of keeping themselves safe). The pervasiveness of this experience mirrors the sociological construct of minority stress (Meyer, 1995), which is a non-clinical term defined as the chronic experience of stress due to the individual’s minority status. However, the interviews revert to interlinking considerations related to intersectionality (i.e., the increased experience of minority stress due to overlapping minority identities; Crenshaw, 1989), because some interviewees suggested that belonging to a higher socio-economic status put them under more pressure as they had to adhere to stricter social expectations.

Similarly, participants expressed an ambiguous relationship with the in-group, with both narratives of conflict and safety competing in this context. It appears that the participants felt safest amongst other TGNC individuals, expressing a sense of belonging and mentioning the sharing of resources. However, in connection with other members of the LGBTQIA+ community, participants expressed the most conflict, referring to jealousy. Furthermore, it appears that other members of the in-groups subconsciously present a danger to the participants’ assimilation efforts, as participants fear to stand out more through association with the in-group. The ambivalence of the presented narratives also continues in the way that the interviewees viewed their own identity in the context of in vs. out-group. The positive self-talk appeared limited to their personality, referring, for example, to their education, eloquence, or confidence. However, participants did not appear to view their ‘Transness’ as a source of pride—instead, interviewees presented with a pronounced black-and-white thinking that reiterated common conceptions in mainstream culture.

Throughout all interviews, participants demonstrated a variety of resilience factors that map onto the 7Cs by Ginsburg (2014):



1. Competence: Refers to successful stress management skills, here, for example, reflected in the participants' willingness to share resources and knowledge amongst each other.
2. Confidence: The trust in the competence above, expressed as positive self-talk and optimism in the interviews.
3. Connection: A sense of community and belonging that was not restricted to the TGNC community, featuring notions of collectivist culture.
4. Character: Defined as a set of clear values, which included the adherence to societal hierarchies in the interviews.
5. Contribution: Refers to the individual offering help. In the interviews, this appeared to be linked to the support individuals offered on a community level (e.g., activism).
6. Coping: The successful implementation of competence to manage stress. Participants utilized a wide variety of adaptive strategies (e.g., humor, religious practice) and maladaptive coping (e.g., emotional detachment, trivializing violence).
7. Control: The sense of self-agency an individual experiences during stressful events. Participants mostly emphasized their control in interviews, particularly when discussing their societal trajectories and transition process.

In addition, the TGNC narratives featured affective components in their statements often summarized in the activism literature as *gender euphoria* (Beischel et al., 2022). This intensely positive emotion is commonly used by TGNC individuals when describing joy and satisfaction derived from their gender identity.

The preliminary TA confirms these observed trends in the remaining interviews. The pattern of narratives can currently be summarized as following themes:

- *Minority stress* – including the sub-themes *lack of support*, *the need for secrecy pre-transition*, *constant fear of violence*, *being shunned from collective*, and *internalized transphobic narratives*;
- *Resilience*, including the 7Cs as sub-themes, as well as the additional *gender euphoria*; *nuanced perceptions on heteronormative out-group*; *competitive perception of gay and lesbian out-group*; *increased stressors on the intersectionality of multiple social roles*; and *positive*, as well as *negative transition-related experiences*.

## CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the results offer an opportunity to re-conceptualize existing constructs more nuancedly. This includes the substantiation of the mostly sociological term 'minority stress' with psychologically relevant lived experiences of TGNC individuals. Here, the interviews allow for a more intimate understanding of how those persistent stress experiences might be expressed in assessment situations. For example, the current study observed a nuanced optimistic outlook, often communicated with trivializing strategies and extremely positive self-talk. This is balanced with a newly proposed construct, namely *minority resilience*. This novel concept frames resilience as a specific function of a community on the fringes of society. While this maps onto existing literature, the findings suggest that connection, here, a sense of community, is particularly weighed in the observed narratives and expanded with an intense experience of bodily satisfaction.

Beyond innovation in theory, the current research also offers a methodological commentary on wider explorative qualitative approaches. The study is one of the first to implement the multi-method qualitative framework by Alejandro and Zhao (2023), combining the in-depth DA with a broader TA. This method of integration is proof of utility and feasibility. It is expected to offer a practical example of their theoretical guidance, likely encouraging future research to find innovative avenues to make qualitative methodology more rigorous.

As this project is part of a growing body of literature introducing an explicitly more positivistic approach, it is hoped that the findings can lead to a more holistic and destigmatized understanding of the TGNC community. While knowledge about challenges and negative experiences is vital, the new



outlook allows scholars and practitioners to understand successful transition trajectories, which can serve as templates for future interventions. Beyond this focus on the individual's psychology for care pathway planning, the societal perspective in the analysis is hoped to inform initiatives on a community level. Here, the study expands the predominantly Western literature with a more collectivist perspective, and South Asian literature by expanding on the unique challenges and resilience of the TGNC community. Future research will have to compare these findings across different cultures, as well as across broader data sets within the TGNC community.

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