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Minority stress, resilience and community in LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago: A qualitative study

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To my parents, Franci Hodgkinson Clarke and Seamus Clarke. Words cannot express my gratitude for your unconditional love, support and faith in me. Thank you for always encouraging me to experience the world and find my own place in it, even if that place is far from home

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Abstract

Individuals who fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella still face pervasive systemic prejudice and discrimination worldwide, resulting in a multitude of challenges in various spheres of life and increasing their risk for poor health outcomes, such as mental health disorders like anxiety and depression. To buffer against the negative effects of this unequal treatment, which can be conceptualised as minority stress, LGBTQ+ people may employ a variety of individual and community resilience strategies. Although the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals may vary greatly depending on context, the majority of psychological research on this population to date has focused on individuals from Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic countries, with relatively limited research on LGBTQ+ individuals from smaller countries such as those in the Caribbean region. This qualitative study analysed semi-structured interviews with 21 LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago to understand how they experience, confront, cope with, and challenge prejudice related to their identities. Six key themes were identified through thematic analysis: (1) Varied family dynamics of non-acceptance and support, (2) Experiences of discrimination in public spheres, (3) Exclusion and discrimination within the LGBTQ+ community, (4) Navigating identity disclosure and self-expression, (5) Psychological and emotional impact of prejudice, and (6) Resilience and resistance. These findings provide insight into the stress that LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago experience related to societal prejudice in various spheres of life, and the diversity of individual and community resources they draw on to remain resilient, resist systemic oppression, and advocate for equality.

Chapter 1: The LGBTQ+ community

1.1. LGBTQ+ community

1.1.1. Defining the community

The LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and other sexually or gender diverse identities) community is a convenient acronym for grouping the identities that fall outside of heterosexual and cisgender norms. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the community is heterogeneous and in fact comprises several different communities or subgroups (Singh et al., 2021; Klysing et al., 2024). The groups that fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella can be understood through four interrelated but distinct components of sexual identity: sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation (Jourian, 2015).

Sex refers solely to physiological components—that is, "how one's genes, hormones, biochemistry, and internal and external anatomy combine to affect the physical body" (Jourian, 2015, p. 14). In many societies sex is considered to be binary and individuals are usually assigned as either male or female at birth based on their sex characteristics, but in reality, there is wide sex variation in human beings. Intersex individuals, for instance, have sex characteristics that do not neatly fall under either binary category. For this divergence from the normative binary, intersex individuals are sometimes included as part of the LGBTQ+ umbrella (Jourian, 2015).

Gender is often mistakenly considered synonymous with sex, but even though gender expectations are certainly often associated with a person's assigned sex at birth, it is a distinct construct, consisting of characteristics and roles that are "sociohistorically and culturally constructed" (Jourian, 2015, p.14). Under the umbrella of gender are the two related but separate constructs of gender identity and gender expression. Gender identity refers to a person's internal experience and sense of their own gender, which may not necessarily be apparent to others (Lewis & Reynolds, 2021, Singh et al., 2021). When an individual's gender identity is the same as the sex assigned to them at birth, they are considered to be cisgender; when it is different, they are typically considered to be transgender (Jourian, 2015). However, not every individual whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth may identify with the term transgender, so the term gender diverse can also be used as an umbrella term to encompass all non-cisgender gender identities (Wolfe & Fogwell, 2022). Even though many post-colonial and Western societies impose a male/female gender binary,

tied closely to the sex binary, the spectrum of gender identities is actually vast and far from binary. A person may identify as a man or a woman, but they may also identify as a non-binary gender, including, for instance, neither gender, both genders, fluidly shifting between and outside different genders, or a different gender entirely. Some terms to describe this type of gender identity are non-binary (often considered an umbrella term for genders that are neither male or female but also often used as an identity on its own), genderfluid and genderqueer, to name a few (Jourian, 2015). Gender expression, on the other hand, is the public presentation of one's gender, which may not necessarily be consistent with their gender identity. For example, a cisgender woman may have a masculine gender expression, but this does not automatically make her a transgender man. Similarly, a transgender man can have feminine gender expression, but this does not make him any less of a man (Jourian, 2015).

Lastly, sexual orientation reflects a person's "sexual, emotional and/or physical attraction to another person" (Singh et al., 2021, p. 121). Like gender identity, the spectrum of sexual orientation is wide and transcends binaries, including but not limited to exclusive attraction to the same gender, exclusive attraction to other genders, attraction to all genders, or attraction to no one. Fittingly, the variety of terms that can be used to define an individual's sexual orientation are also vast—for example, heterosexual or straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual and queer (Jourian, 2015). The word homosexual is another term that has often been used to describe the orientations of those attracted to the same gender, but due to negative connotations related to the pathologization and criminalization of non-heterosexual identities, it is largely considered outdated and may even be considered offensive and demeaning to members of the community (Thelwall et al., 2022). Therefore, I will avoid using this term throughout the paper, aside from in reference to specific laws, constructs and studies that use the term. While gender identity and sexual orientation are closely related, they're not mutually exclusive (Lewis & Reynolds, 2021). For instance, a transgender man can be heterosexual, a non-binary person can be a lesbian and a cisgender man can be bisexual, among endless possible combinations.

When considering LGBTQ+ people around the globe, it is important to keep in mind that the idea of these components of sexual identity being distinct constructs, along with the related terminology, such as the LGBTQ+ acronym and the identities that comprise it, are Western configurations that may not be apply in the same way, if at all, to all cultures (Monro, 2020; Klysing et al., 2024). Certain cultures have local and indigenous ways of

conceptualising gender and sexual orientation, including identities that do not include such a clear delineation between the two, such as the South Asian identity of 'hijra' (Klysing et al., 2024; Monro, 2020).

Thinking of the community as a whole, a variety of terms have been used to describe the LGBTQ+ community, both by the community itself and within other spheres such as academia, and each has its pros and cons. There is far from a consensus on the term to use within the literature or even by members of the community itself. One example is sexual and gender minorities (SGM), which is commonly used in research. Another is queer, which is a reclaimed slur that has been increasingly used both within academia and by members of the community itself as an umbrella term for the community as a whole, or to identify with a non-heterosexual sexual orientation, a non-cisgender gender identity or both (Wolfe & Fogwell, 2022). However, the term queer is still not accepted or used by everyone within the community (Jourian, 2015).

In this paper, I have chosen to use the acronym LGBTQ+ when speaking about the community as a whole. This acronym, an expansion of the historical "LGBT" acronym, is becoming increasingly used by both members of the community itself and by researchers (Thelwall et al., 2022) as an easily recognizable name for the community. The more recent inclusion of the Q for queer or questioning and the plus symbol (+) makes it more inclusive of identities that do not necessarily fall under the first four letters, thus acknowledging the diverse, practically endless ways in which people may choose to self-identify. It is useful to have a catch-all term as, even though it is crucial to not mistakenly view the LGBTQ+ acronym as describing one monolithic group of people, the groups that make up this umbrella have formed historical and present-day alliances, often share a sense of community and culture, and face shared challenges rooted in similar forms of prejudice (Klysing et al., 2024; Lewis & Reynolds, 2021). I have chosen not to include the 'I' for intersex, as the experiences of individuals with variations in sex characteristics are beyond the scope of this thesis. While research on intersex people is critically needed, and they are sometimes included as part of the umbrella (e.g., LGBTI, LGBTQI+), including the 'I' here without solely for the sake of inclusivity without giving it proper focus would be a performative gesture, which is a practice criticised by intersex communities (Klysing et al., 2024). Additionally, throughout the paper I may use other terms such as SGM, queer, or other variations of the LGBT acronym (LGBT, LGBTQIA+, LGB, etc.) when referencing specific subgroups within the community, or literature, organisations or legislation that use those terms.

1.1.2. Statistics

The number of LGBTQ+ individuals worldwide is likely substantial. However, there are many challenges to estimating the size of the LGBTQ+ population worldwide, making it difficult to obtain an accurate figure (Valfort, 2017; Lewis & Reynolds, 2021). Participants may not always be willing to disclose their minority sexual orientation or gender identity, particularly depending on the survey method—for example, a face-to-face interview versus an anonymous survey may yield different results. In addition, the phrasing of the question may also influence answers. For instance, some participants may answer affirmatively to questions asking about same-gender attraction, behaviors or partners, but may not necessarily identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or another non-heterosexual identity (Valfort, 2017; Lewis & Reynolds, 2021). The accuracy of measures of the LGBTQ+ population likely differ even more depending on how tolerant the context is, as participants may be even less willing to disclose a minority sexual orientation or gender identity in environments where they feel more pressure to hide their identities or fear consequences such as social exclusion, job loss or legal repercussions. Therefore, any population statistics of LGBTQ+ people could be underestimations, particularly in countries where LGBTQ+ individuals face more persecution and less legal protection.

Nonetheless, population estimates conducted across various contexts can provide useful information. One recent study by market research company Ipsos (2023) surveyed adults in 30 different countries across Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia, with approximately 1000 participants in each country. On average, 9% of adults in the sample identified as LGBTQ+, with 8% identifying as a non-heterosexual sexual orientation, and 3% identifying as a gender identity other than a cisgender male or cisgender female. The percentage of adults who identified as LGBTQ+ varied greatly across countries, from just 4% in Peru to 15% in Brazil (Ipsos, 2023). Another report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) used the results of nationally representative surveys from 14 countries across Oceania, North America, Europe and the Americas to estimate rates of LGBT identification. The percentage of adults who identified as either lesbian, gay or bisexual was estimated at 2.7% on average, ranging from 1.2% in Norway to 3.8% in the United States. Nationally representative data on transgender populations was more scant, but estimates from the United States and Chile put transgender identification at 0.1% and 0.3% respectively (OECD, 2019).

1.1.3. Prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people

There have been significant strides towards equality for LGBTQ+ people in many parts of the world, due in large part to the relentless resistance, activism and advocacy of members of the community itself. However, LGBTQ+ people globally still face inequality, structural discrimination and other challenges rooted in societal prejudice (Singh et al., 2021). For example, 144 UN members states still do not legally recognize any form of same-sex marriage or civil partnership, and only 23 UN member states legally recognise self-identified gender identity (Mendos & Rohaizad, 2024). Additionally, in 60 United Nations (UN) member states, consensual same-sex sexual activity is still a criminal act, and in seven of those states this act is punishable by death (Mendos & Rohaizad, 2024; Kojoué, 2024). These statistics, which actually reflect an improvement in the global legal landscape from previous years (Mendos & Rohaizad, 2024), demonstrate that much progress still needs to be made before equality for LGBTQ+ people is achieved.

In fact, even though the general trend has been towards removing such discriminatory laws, certain countries have been moving in the opposite direction in recent years, enacting new laws that further discriminate against and deny rights to LGBTQ+ people. This trend is not restricted to just one or two specific regions, but can be seen across Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas (Mendos & Rohaizad, 2024). For instance, in 2024, Uganda's Constitutional Court decided to uphold its 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act, which criminalises consensual same-sex conduct with punishments of up to life imprisonment and, in certain circumstances, even the death penalty (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Ghana also passed a bill in 2024 that made it illegal to identify as LGBTQ+ or to fund or form LGBTQ+ groups, with punishments of up to three and five years in prison, respectively (Naadi, 2024). In addition, Hungary imposed a Propaganda Law in 2021 which prohibits content related to LGBTQ+ people in the media or educational institutions, thus severely restricting freedom of expression and access to information related to LGBTQ+ topics (Amnesty International, 2024). These examples indicate the non-linear nature of progress towards LGBTQ+ rights, and the increasing threats to freedom and equality that LGBTQ+ people face in certain parts of the world.

In order to fully understand the continued challenges that LGBTQ+ people face on a global scale, it is crucial to understand the forms of prejudice underlying these systemic inequalities. A classic definition of prejudice, from Allport (1954) is "an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group,

and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group" (p. 7). Allport (1954) argues that prejudice is not only an individual issue, but that it is present on multiple levels in society, including in institutional and societal norms. In some of its forms, prejudice can be so deeply ingrained that it is not even recognized as prejudice, but still insidiously affects multiple aspects of a marginalised individual's lives. While prejudice does not always manifest in external behaviors, it can lead to discrimination, which is the unequal treatment of groups or individuals based on their categorization in a particular group. This discrimination may be embedded into societal institutions and policies, thus marginalising and disadvantaging certain groups while privileging others (Allport, 1954).

In order to understand the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ people worldwide, it is important to understand the pervasive forms of structural prejudice and discrimination that shape their lives. Perhaps the most commonly used term to describe negative attitudes and behaviors towards LGBTQ+ people is homophobia (Peel et al., 2021). This term was first coined by psychologist George Weinberg in the late 1960s to describe a literal fear of being around homosexuals (Herek, 2004). Weinberg identified this fear as closely tied to male gender norms, and labelled it as a form of prejudice that leads to negative behaviors against homosexuals. Considering that homosexuality itself was widely viewed as a pathology during this era, this problematization of negative attitudes towards homosexuals was relatively revolutionary at the time, and contributed to an important shift in focus towards the unfair hostility that sexual minorities face (Herek, 2004). Since its conception, the term homophobia has come to be understood to more generally describe negative emotions, beliefs and actions towards non-heterosexual people (Peel et al., 2021). The concept has also been extended to terms that describe the distinct forms of prejudice against other groups within the LGBTQ+ community such as bisexual people, lesbians and transgender people, with terms such as biphobia, lesbophobia and transphobia, respectively (Peel at al., 2021; Herek, 2004).

However, there are various criticisms of the concept of homophobia and its offshoots, and their widespread use to categorise all forms of anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice and discrimination. Some have argued that the use of the suffix "-phobia" implies that antigay attitudes are a pathology rooted in fear and anxiety, when research has found that anger and disgust are the more prominent emotions (Herek, 2004). Another related criticism is that some argue that this implication that homophobia is a psychological problem and, more generally, the focus on individual attitudes and behaviors, shifts the focus too heavily to the individual level and away from the wider cultural context that these attitudes and behaviors

are rooted in, thus falsely individualising and depoliticising what is really a systemic issue (Herek, 2004; Peel et al., 2021). Even though the term homophobia is still widely used and is useful when focusing on individuals, these critiques highlight the need for more varied and expansive terminology to describe the specific and complex ways in which anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice and discrimination are ingrained into society.

One such term is heterosexism, which describes the system of beliefs that justifies the marginalisation of non-heterosexual ways of living, being and relating (Peel et al., 2021). Unlike homophobia, heterosexism was not conceptualised to refer to individuals, but rather to the cultural institutions like religion, education and law in which these beliefs are deeply ingrained, and on how these institutions collectively contribute to an environment that denies sexual diversity and is hostile towards those who deviate from heterosexual norms (Herek, 2004; Peel et al., 2021). Similarly, heteronormativity refers to the set of societal beliefs that heterosexuality, specifically defined as relationships between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman, is the default or only "normal" form of sexuality (Peel et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021). This intrinsic connection to gender binarism means that heteronormativity affects both cisgender non-heterosexual people and transgender people alike, privileging cisgender heterosexuality and marginalising any relationship or person who diverges from this norm (Singh et al., 2021). An example of a way in which heteronormativity is enforced through societal institutions is the idea of marriage as a union between a male and female person, and the laws that limit marriage to this definition.

When it comes to gender specifically, cisgenderism is "a concept used to describe an ideology that marginalises and delegitimizes people's own understandings of their bodies and identities" (Peel et al., 2021, p. 106). It involves the assumption that gender is binary, unchanging, and should be determined based on assigned sex at birth. This ideology promotes marginalisation, pathologization and rejection of those whose gender identities and expressions do not conform to these strict normative ideas, and influences how everyone—not just transgender people—navigates and expresses their gender identity (Peel et al., 2021). Cisgenderism also includes the enforcement of the cisgender/transgender binary, as some argue that this binary may exclude and erase the experiences of those who do not neatly fit into one category or another, such as intersex people, or people who identify with non-binary or culturally-specific genders (Ansara, 2015). A closely related concept is cisnormativity, which is the system of societal beliefs that everyone is or should be cisgender and that being cisgender is the default, which consequently erases and others those who are not cisgender

(Stewart et al., 2022). Altogether, heterosexism, heteronormativity, cisgenderism and cisnormativity represent distinct but intrinsically related systems that work together to influence societal views of LGBTQ+ people on different levels. In light of this connection, the terms can be merged to foreground the systems of prejudice against variations in sexual orientation and gender identity, as cisheterosexism and cisheteronormativity.

Together, all of these forms of prejudice and discrimination contribute to shaping the social environments for LGBTQ+ individuals globally, creating varying degrees of marginalisation and inequality across multiple cultural contexts. This manifests in fundamental spheres, such as employment, healthcare and housing. For instance, in a recent survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2024), 19% of LGBTIQ people across 27 European countries reported feeling discriminated against when looking for a job or at work. Transgender participants were disproportionately affected: 43% of trans women and 35% of trans men reported experiencing employment discrimination (FRA, 2024). This discrimination has significant material consequences, as employment discrimination can contribute to higher rates of poverty and lower lifetime earnings for LGBTQ+ individuals compared to their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts (Valfort, 2017).

Another significant issue for LGBTQ+ people, especially transgender and gender diverse individuals, is barriers to adequate healthcare. For example, transgender and gender diverse individuals often face barriers such as a shortage of adequate, well-trained providers, high costs and lack of insurance coverage, reluctance to disclose identity due to fear of facing discrimination, and refusal of care (Kearns et al., 2021). Once they access healthcare, they face discriminatory treatment such as misgendering and being required to prove their identities and conform to binary expectations of gender expression in order to be validated as transgender (Kearns et al., 2021). Additionally, the cisheteronormativity embedded in the training of healthcare professionals means that many of them are unequipped to address the specific needs of patients with non-cisgender identities or same-sex partners, which, even in the absence of individual prejudice, sometimes results in inadequate or even harmful care (Arthur et al., 2021; Kearns et al., 2021).

Even though these forms of prejudice and discrimination affect all LGBTQ+ individuals in theory, individual factors can influence each person's experiences and the way they are affected in reality. Adopting an intersectional perspective is crucial to understanding the heterogeneous experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. The concept of intersectionality, initially coined by Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), outlines how different

characteristics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability and socioeconomic class interact to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. When an individual holds multiple marginalised identities, the oppression that they face is more than just the sum of its parts, but it creates a unique experience that cannot be understood from looking at any one form of oppression in isolation (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, the intersection of racial prejudice with transphobia/cisgenderism means that transgender women of colour, particularly Black transgender women, are at a significantly higher risk of experiencing violence (Singh et al., 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to consider how experiences vary within the community, and how these forms of oppression interact together to create distinct risks and vulnerabilities (Crenshaw, 1989).

1.1.4. Mental health disparities

It has been well-documented that LGBTQ+ individuals are considerably more likely to face mental health challenges when compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts. A narrative review of 98 studies conducted by Hatzenbuehler et al. (2024) found an association between structural stigma and adverse health outcomes in LGBTQ+ samples, with higher structural stigma correlating positively with higher risk for poor physical, psychological and social health. This majority of included studies were based in the USA, but included studies conducted in parts of Asia, Europe, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Africa (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2024). A systematic review conducted by Millet et al. (2016), describing 25 studies found that transgender populations had higher anxiety symptoms and more anxiety disorder diagnoses compared to cisgender populations (Millet et al., 2016). Similarly, a meta-analysis of 26 studies conducted by Wittgens et al. (2022) found higher risks for mental health disorders in LGB people compared to heterosexuals. However, it should be noted that both of these studies focused on mostly European or North American samples.

This manifestation of this issue is not homogeneous across the entire LGBTQ+ community, as different levels of vulnerability have been identified for different subgroups within the community. For instance, bisexuals may have an increased risk of mental health issues. The Wittgens et al. (2022) meta-analysis found that bisexuals individuals had a higher risk of depression and suicidality compared to lesbians and gay men. In addition, a cross-sectional study by Chan et al. (2020) on cisgender LGB individuals in Hong Kong found that bisexuals had higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms, as well as other internal

challenges like decreased sense of connection to the LGBT community as external pressure to conceal their sexual orientations. Another group that may be particularly vulnerable is transgender and gender diverse individuals. A US-based longitudinal study by Newcomb et al. (2019) found significantly higher rates of depression and suicidality in transgender and gender diverse youth compared to cisgender sexual minority youth, as well as the general population. Non-binary youth had the highest rates of depression, suicidal ideation and alcohol abuse (Newcomb et al., 2019).

1.1.5. Moving beyond the WEIRD bubble

As outlined above, the challenges that LGBTQ+ people face are a global phenomenon, with systems of oppression present in different forms across various contexts. However, the experiences of LGBTQ+ people are not homogenous and can vary significantly depending on contextual factors like the legal system and social norms. Despite this context-specificity, the majority of the research on LGBTQ+ populations has been conducted on participants from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) contexts, particularly ones who are White (Horne, 2020). Considering that the majority of people in the world that fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella live in environments that are legally and/or socially unaccepting of minority sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions, this leaves a large gap in research on the types of challenges and risks that LGBTQ+ people face and how they deal with them (Horne, 2020).

This WEIRD focus also affects the assumptions and perspectives of research on LGBTQ+ people, including assumptions about what is important for LGBTQ+ people. For example, in mainstream LGBTQ+ research, the notion of "coming out" or being "out" is often considered extremely important for the wellbeing and self-acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, but this self-disclosure may hold less importance for LGBTQ+ people in some non-WEIRD contexts, particularly when it poses a high safety risk (Horne, 2020). These assumptions can cause researchers to overlook factors that are more important to people in non-WEIRD contexts and over-emphasize factors that are of lesser importance. Therefore it is crucial to critically examine the cultural origins of such assumptions and interpret the identities and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within their own cultural contexts (Horne, 2020).

Furthermore, Western LGBTQ+ advocacy approaches have been criticised for evaluating non-WEIRD countries based on a narrow, Western-centric definition of progress, often generalising them as entirely backward or in need of intervention from WEIRD

outsiders, while overlooking local voices and dismissing the advocacy work already being done within these contexts (Horne, 2020). These Western-centered and Western-informed approaches can also downplay or even ignore the colonial legacies that are responsible for contributing to or even introducing anti-LGBTQ+ marginalisation in many contexts, and the global power dynamics at play (Monro, 2020). In reality, the road and strategies towards equality can look different depending on the context, and should therefore be viewed in their historical, political and geographical contexts (Horne, 2020). Thus, expanding the research focus beyond WEIRD contexts when studying the LGBTQ+ community is crucial for avoiding overgeneralization and gaining a broader, more nuanced understanding of the conditions of LGBTQ+ people around the world.

1.2. LGBTQ+ in the Trinbagonian and broader Caribbean context

1.2.1. Defining the Caribbean and Trinidad and Tobago

The Caribbean is a linguistically, culturally and ethnically diverse subregion of North America, comprising about 30 sovereign states and dependent territories situated throughout and bordering the Caribbean Sea (Nicolas & Wheatley, 2013). The region's diversity and pluralism reflect the cultural influences of the indigenous populations and diverse waves of migration to the various states, along with shared histories of European and North American colonisation.

The Southernmost state in the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago is a multicultural, English-speaking twin island republic with a population of approximately 1.5 million people (World Health Organization, 2024). As of the 2011 Census, approximately 95.4% of the country's population lived in Trinidad (Trinidad and Tobago, 2011). As with other Caribbean countries, Trinidad and Tobago has a deep colonial history—it was under British rule for the majority of its existence prior to its 1962 independence, but was also under Spanish and French rule for some time (Abdel-Shehid, 2020). While Trinidad and Tobago shares cultural and historical similarities with the rest of the Caribbean, especially the English-speaking Caribbean, it is unique in certain ways. Firstly, it is one of the largest and wealthiest countries in the region (Stephenson & Balwant, 2021). In addition, the country's demographics set it apart as one of the most ethno-racially diverse Caribbean countries, and the only English-speaking Caribbean country without an Afro-Caribbean majority (Stephenson & Balwat, 2019; Abdel-Shehid, 2020). The Indo-Trinidadian and Afro-Trinidadian populations are relatively equal in size, together comprising about 70% of the population, followed by Mixed/Multiracial individuals comprising 22.8%, then other groups such as Caucasians,

Chinese, Indigenous and Syrian/Lebanese constitute less than 1% of the population each (Central Statistical Office, 2011).

The country's diversity can be credited to large waves of immigration to the country, most notably the forced migration of enslaved Africans during the British colonial rule, followed by the post-independence waves of Indian indentured labourers (Abdel-Shehid, 2021). As a result, multiculturalism is a defining feature of Trinbagonian culture, and the influence of various ethnic groups can be seen in cultural practices like music, cuisine and festivities (Mahoney, 2018). In addition, this diversity is also reflected in religious diversity, with Christianity holding the majority at around 46%, then Hinduism at 18.2, Islam at 5% and Orisha at 0.9% (Central Statistical Office, 2011). However, this ethno-racial diversity also brings with it racial divisions and tensions, and like much of the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago's societal norms uphold an unofficial, unspoken hierarchy based on race and skin colour, dating back to the times of colonialism, which privileges White people and those with lighter-coloured skin (Abdel-Shehid, 2021; Kelly, 2023).

In Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean context, there are various cultural factors and societal norms that play an important role in shaping the environment for LGBTQ+ rights. Like the rest of the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago has been described as a heterosexist, heteronormative, homophobic and patriarchal society, which influences the experiences of and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals (Stephenson et al., 2020; Stephenson & Balwant, 2019l Mahoney, 2018). This means that non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities, behaviors and presentations are viewed as deviant and "other", often leaving LGBTQ+ people feeling pressured to stifle their self-expression and conceal their identities (Stephenson & Balwant, 2019). Adding to the view of LGBTQ+ identities and expressions as "other" is the fact that they are often viewed as a Western cultural export that has only recently "contaminated" Caribbean society, which is a view that is rooted in anticolonialism but that consequently puts LGBTQ+ identities at odds with national or regional identities, and further pushes LGBTQ+ Caribbean people to the margins (Sharpe & Pinto, 2006; Mahoney, 2018).

Additionally, as Stephenson et al. (2020) outline, the patriarchal structure of the country and region, built on ideas of a heterosexual nuclear family with a man as the dominant head of the household, further contributes to creating a prejudiced environment for LGBTQ+ individuals. Crucial to maintaining the patriarchy is the culture of hypermasculinity, in which men are expected to conform to narrow expectations of what it

means to be a man, such as having lots of sexual partners and objectifying women. These strict gender roles are intrinsically tied to cisheteronormativity, and any man who deviates from these norms by uptaking traditionally feminine roles or forms of expression is viewed as a threat to the patriarchy and met with strong derision, marginalisation and sometimes violence (Stephenson et al., 2020). Together, the cisheterosexist, cisheteronormative, homophobic and patriarchal systems embedded into Trinbagonian and Caribbean culture significantly shape the environment for LGBTQ+ people.

1.2.2. State of LGBTQ+ rights in the region

The impact of these cisheteronormative and cisheterosexist cultural norms can be seen in the institutional discrimination against LGBTQ+ people throughout the Caribbean, which has been notoriously slow to the progression of LGBTQ+ rights. From a legal standpoint, there is a lack of equal treatment and protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ people in many Caribbean countries. A review of policy documents and government strategies by Malta et al. (2019) found that discriminatory laws against LGBTQ+ individuals are prevalent across the Caribbean. For example, the majority of Caribbean countries still have British colonial-era laws that ban consensual sexual activity, such as the "buggery laws" which outlaw anal sex. Officially, the punishment for violating these laws ranges from 10 years to life imprisonment, but they are rarely enforced. Additionally, same-sex adoption, same-sex marriage and the service of openly SGM in the military are prohibited in. The authors of the review argue that, when it comes to LGBTQ+ people, "the majority of Caribbean countries do not seem to be influenced by the 'International Bill of Human Rights' and its core principles to promote and protect human rights of individuals and more vulnerable groups, such as SGM" (Malta et al., 2019, p. 11).

Trinidad and Tobago is of little exception to this, but there has been some progress in recent years that sets it apart from some other English-speaking Caribbean countries (McNeal, 2023). In 2017, gay activist Jason Jones began a legal battle to challenge two sections of the country's colonial-era Sexual Offences Act which criminalised consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults. In 2018, following a long legal battle and demonstrations by religious groups in favour of keeping the law, as well as counter-demonstrations by LGBTQ+ activist groups, Jones won the case and the Constitutional Court declared these laws unconstitutional (McNeal, 2023). This landmark decision made Trinidad and Tobago one of 6 English-speaking Caribbean countries to have decriminalised same-sex sexual activity since 2010, following after Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, and St. Kitts and

Nevis, and eventually including Barbados and Dominica who have since also decriminalised similar laws (Cabrera, 2024). However, the decision to overturn these laws was then appealed by the state and the decision from the Court of Appeal is still pending, leaving the final outcome in limbo (Achong, 2023). In addition, the country's Immigration Act (Trinidad and Tobago, 1976) still bans "prostitutes, homosexuals or persons living on the earnings of prostitutes or homosexuals, or persons reasonably suspected as coming to Trinidad and Tobago for these or any other immoral purposes" (p. 12) from entering the country, with the exception of citizens, residents or other CARICOM (Caribbean Community) nationals. Notably, there is little evidence of these laws being historically or presently enforced in Trinidad and Tobago or the rest of the English-speaking Caribbean on a large scale, leading some scholars to argue that the situation is not as dire as it might appear on paper (Stanislas, 2024). However, their very existence still legitimises the marginalisation and oppression of people who do not fit cisheternormative ideals, and presents a barrier to equality for LGBTQ+ people in the country.

In addition to the laws that specifically discriminate, there is also a lack of legal protection for LGBTQ+ adults in the Caribbean region, leaving them particularly vulnerable to discrimination and violence in multiple spheres of life (Malga et al., 2019). For example, even though Trinidad and Tobago is one of few English-speaking Caribbean countries with anti-discrimination legislation, its Equal Opportunity Act explicitly states that "sexual preference or orientation" are not included as protected categories (Trinidad and Tobago, 2000). Taken together, the discriminatory laws and lack of legal protections of LGBTQ+ people signify how deeply discrimination and prejudice against LGBTQ+ people are embedded into Caribbean society, and leave them in a vulnerable position.

1.2.3. Attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people

Even though the deposit of research on LGBTQ+ people in the region is very limited, it has been slowly expanding. The existing research is largely, though not exclusively, from former British colonies such as Jamaica and Barbados (Couzens et al., 2017). The research that does exist indicates generally negative societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people in the region. For instance, an analysis of a 2013 survey of individuals in Guyana, Barbados and Trinidad by Griffith & Wickham (2016) investigated the views on laws that criminalise homosexuality (as this was before Trinidad and Tobago repealed its bugger and gross indecency laws) and found similarly prejudiced views. Nearly two-thirds of respondents supported the laws criminalising sodomy, over one-third thought that laws should punish

private sex between two men or two women, and over one-third said that they hate gays (Griffith & Wickham, 2016). Furthermore, a study by Rambarran et al. (2022) on medical students in Guyana found moderate levels of prejudice towards LGBT people. In addition, participants lacked knowledge on the unique healthcare needs and treatment approaches for LGBT persons, with the vast majority having never received specific training, despite a desire for it (Rambarran et al., 2022).

Certain studies shed light on factors that influence levels of prejudice, painting a more nuanced picture of cultural attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people. A self-report study by Stephenson and Balwant (2019) on undergraduate university students in Trinidad found that the sample did not generally consider themselves homophobic, but still had homophobic attitudes that indicated underlying heterosexist ideas, with various cultural and socialisation factors influencing attitudes. One of the most influential factors was religion, as Christians were more likely to not support rights for gay people, whereas Hindus and those with no religion were more likely to support rights, and those with no religion were less supportive of anti-gay legislation or penalties. A weak but significant association between race and views of gay rights was also found, as Indo-Trinidadians were more supportive of gay rights and for the removal of discriminatory laws, with the opposite shown for Afro-Trinidadians, which is a difference that could be attributed to differences in religious affiliation. The impact of the hypermasculine and patriarchal culture was also evident, as men were more likely to be homophobic and to refuse to work with homosexuals (Stephenson & Balwant, 2019).

A study by Chaux et al. (2021) found similar results by analysing attitudes towards homosexuality in Latin American and Caribbean countries, not including Trinidad and Tobago. Results revealed a trend towards more positive attitudes between 2010 and 2016, but Caribbean countries still showed low levels of acceptance overall, with religion and gender again having significant influence. For religion, Protestants and evangelicals were found to be the most homophobic, followed by Catholics, and for gender, men were found to be more homophobic (Chaux et al., 2021).

Another study by Heilman et al. (2024) sheds light on the role of the patriarchy and hypermasculine expectations. The study used a mixed methodology of online surveys and focus groups on young men in Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. Over a third of participants held negative views of gay men tied to views of masculinity, such as that gay men are not “real men”, and about a third of the participants from Trinidad and Tobago said that they would not be friends with a gay man (Heilman et al., 2024).

Taken together, these studies suggest the important role that factors like religion and gender expectations might play in shaping attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people in Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean. However, it is important to note that the majority of this research is more than 5 years old and it is possible that these results do not reflect contemporary attitudes. Additionally, there is a significant lack of research on the attitudes towards transgender and gender diverse individuals specifically compared to sexual minorities and LGBTQ+ people in general, and it cannot be assumed that they are the same.

1.2.4. Experiences of LGBTQ+ people

These intolerant attitudes translate into a non-accepting, sometimes hostile environment for LGBTQ+ people in the Caribbean, who often face discrimination, violence and an inability to live openly. Lanham et al.'s 2019 study on transgender women's experiences in Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Haiti and El Salvador found that participants experienced prevalent gender-based physical, sexual and emotional violence in multiple spheres. This includes healthcare, education, policing and other state institutions such as passport offices, resulting in distressing emotional consequences, inadequate care, and barriers to accessing these institutions altogether (Lanham et al., 2019). In addition, a study by Logie et al. (2016) on LGBT youth in Jamaica found that participants experience verbal, physical and sexual violence across multiple contexts, including family, the workplace, the healthcare system and from police. For many, these experiences result in depression and pressure to hide their sexual and/or gender identities (Logie et al., 2016). Furthermore, Human Rights Watch (2018) conducted field research with LGBT-identifying people in seven English-speaking countries in the Eastern Caribbean: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Participants described the need to hide, fear, experiences of rejection from family and community, exclusion, discrimination and abuse. This social rejection was often cited as being largely rooted in religious beliefs, further highlighting the role that religion plays in shaping attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people in the Caribbean (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Other factors may influence the experiences of LGBTQ+ people. For instance, a study by Couzens et al. (2017) on Black LGB St. Lucian adults found that skin colour affected participants' experiences of discrimination. The degree of tolerance that LGB St. Lucians' experience was influenced by their skin colour—compared to lighter skinned people, darker skinned people experienced worse discrimination and mistreatment, and felt more pressure to conceal their identities and conform to heteronormative standards. This also coincided with

distressing psychological health consequences for darker skinned people. In addition, higher education played a role in mediating this effect, providing darker skinned people with a way to climb the social ladder and experience increased tolerance (Couzens et al., 2017). This influence of skin colour and socioeconomic class underscores the importance of taking an intersectional perspective in considering the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in this region, particularly in countries such as Trinidad and Tobago where racial and socioeconomic class inequalities are pervasive.

Overall, the available research suggests that LGBTQ+ people in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean face multiple challenges and inequalities in various spheres of life, connected to societal prejudice and discrimination against non-hetereosexual and non-cisgender people. This prejudice and discrimination is influenced by various cultural and societal factors such as religion and gender roles, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ people may be influenced by other aspects of themselves such as race, skin colour and class. Even though the research is limited, this highlights the need for nuanced examination of these factors in order to better understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in these contexts.

Chapter 2: Minority Stress and Resilience in LGBTQ+ populations

2.1. Minority stress

2.1.1. Overview of minority stress theory

There is a long history of stigma and pathologization of LGBTQ+ people in the field of psychology, and the mental health disparities of this community were often viewed through this lens. For instance, homosexuality was once classified as a mental disorder until its removal from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) in 1973 (Wolfe & Fogwell, 2022), and from the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) in 1990 (Cochran et al., 2014). While these removals marked significant progress in the view of sexual orientation variances, transgender and gender diverse populations are arguably still officially pathologized, such as with the DSM-V diagnosis of 'gender dysphoria' (Wolfe & Fogwell, 2022). This history has contributed to a lasting misconception that LGBTQ+ identities themselves are responsible for higher rates of psychological distress. However, the development of the minority stress theory challenges these views by postulating that the elevated rates of mental health issues in LGBTQ+ people are not due to their inherent identities, but are rather the result of the social stressors that they face in a stigmatising environment (Meyer, 2003).

Minority stress theory, developed by Meyer (2003), originates from social stress theory, which explains how stressors coming from the social environment can have physical and mental health consequences. Building on the idea that social stress is likely amplified for members of stigmatised groups, Meyer (2003) conceptualises minority stress as stress that is unique to marginalised groups. The theory distinguishes between general stressors that members of every group may experience, such as daily hassles and major life events, and the unique additional stressors that individuals in stigmatised social groups face due to their social position. Crucially, these stressors are chronic, stemming from enduring societal prejudice and discrimination, and thus originate from social institutions and processes rather than individual conditions (Meyers, 2003). Empirical evidence has supported this theory, confirming a strong link between minority stress and adverse mental health outcomes in LGBTQ+ populations (Mongelli et al., 2019; Hoy-Ellis, 2023). For instance, a meta-analysis of studies on LGB youths found that minority stress and negative mental health outcomes, especially depression, were positively correlated (Dürrbaum & Sattler, 2019). Additionally, although minority stress theory was originally developed with LGB individuals in mind, it

has since been expanded to include transgender and gender-diverse populations as well (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Tan et al., 2022; Testa et al., 2015).

2.1.2. Distal and proximal stressors

The minority stress model further divides minority stress into distal and proximal stressors (Meyer, 2003). Distal stressors are external, objective events, such as discrimination, microaggressions and violence. They occur regardless of how individuals perceive or identify themselves; for example, someone in a same-sex relationship may experience discrimination even if they do not self-identify as a non-heterosexual orientation (Meyer, 2003). However, while there are commonalities between the distal stressors experienced across the entire LGBTQ+ community, transgender and gender-diverse people may experience additional, unique forms of discrimination (Testa et al., 2015). For instance, Testa et al. (2015) propose 'nonaffirmation' as an additional distal stressor experienced by transgender and gender diverse populations. This can include, for example, barriers to legal recognition of their chosen names and gender identities, misgendering, being categorised in binary terms when they identify as a non-binary identity, and being called by the name they used prior to coming out as transgender, also known as deadnaming (Testa et al., 2015).

In contrast, proximal stressors are "intrapersonal psychological processes resulting from stigmatization" (Helsen et al., 2022, p. 467). The proximal stressors identified by Meyer (2003) are internalised stigma, the fear of future discrimination or rejection, and concealing one's LGBTQ+ identity. Like with distal stressors, there are commonalities between the experiences of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender individuals, as both populations may experience the aforementioned proximal stressors (Testa et al., 2015). However, as Testa et al. (2015) point out, the experience of concealing one's identity can differ for transgender and gender diverse individuals as, unlike sexual orientation, gender identity is typically tied to physical cues related to gender expression, and is more salient in daily language use in gendered languages. Therefore, the process of hiding their minority gender identity is linked to daily decisions about how they present and refer to themselves on a daily basis, and this process varies depending on where they are in their transition. For example, a transgender woman who is in the middle of medically transitioning may not even be able to hide her transgender identity as her physical appearance may not visibly conform to normative binary gender expectations. Conversely, a transgender woman who has medically and socially transitioned, enabling her to "pass" as a cisgender woman, then needs to decide if she wants to disclose that she is not cisgender, and how to do so (Testa et al., 2015). Therefore, it is

crucial to keep in mind the heterogeneity of minority stress experienced within the LGBTQ+ community.

2.1.3 Intersectionality and the role of multiple minority identities

Individuals with multiple minority identities may also experience minority stress differently (Meyer, 2003). The impact of multiple minority identities is often assumed to be additive, meaning that additional marginalised identities are expected to equate to additional minority stress (Hoy-Ellis, 2023; Moino et al., 2023). However, this approach is limited, as it tends to disregard the complex interactions between different forms of discrimination, such as those targeting racism, gender and socioeconomic status, instead assuming that they can be understood independently from each other (Hoy-Ellis, 2023; Moino et al., 2023). In contrast, the intersectionality approach views experiences of discrimination and prejudice as inseparable and in interaction with each other, creating unique experiences that can only be understood by looking at the whole picture rather than just one aspect (Crenshaw, 1989). In a study on minority stress in sexual and racial minorities that employed both an additive and an intersectional approach, Moino et al. (2023) argued that using both could provide a more complete picture, but overall still found the intersectionality approach to provide more holistic and valid information than the additive approach. This suggests that incorporating an intersectional lens into the minority stress framework can more effectively capture the varied and complex stressors affecting different LGBTQ+ populations.

2.2. Resilience

2.2.1. Conceptualising resilience

Resilience has been operationalised in a number of ways, but it is typically defined as the ability to positively adapt to and recover from adversity (Erickson-Schroth & Glaeser, 2017; Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2022; Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016). For LGBTQ+ individuals, resilience has been theorised to play a crucial role in mitigating the effects of minority stress by fostering positive coping mechanisms and acting as a buffer against the psychological impacts of discrimination and cisheterosexism (Meyer, 2003).

Focusing on resilience can help provide a more complete picture of the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, compared to focusing solely on their vulnerabilities. As Colpitts and Gahagan (2016) have argued, while deficit-focused health research on LGBTQ+ individuals plays an important role in identifying the risk areas for this population, the fact that so much of the LGBTQ+ health research is deficit-focused can "reinforce negative perceptions of

LGBTQ health” (p. 8) while dismissing the steps that these individuals take towards mitigating these risks. The increased focus on resilience in research indicates a move towards a more holistic approach that takes into account the strengths of LGBTQ+ people, emphasising the active role that they play in contributing to and maintaining their own well-being. This focus on resilience strategies can also offer a useful framework for understanding how to protect and bolster the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ individuals. This can inform therapeutic practice and open avenues for the development of interventions that reduce the psychological burdens of societal prejudice by promoting resilience development and increasing the availability of resilience-promoting resources (Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016; Erickson-Schroth & Glaeser, 2017).

The development of resilience is commonly thought to be shaped by the interaction between individual traits, such as personality and genetics, and environmental factors (Erickson-Schroth & Glaeser, 2017). This interaction is particularly important for LGBTQ+ individuals who face multiple forms of oppression, such as those with intersecting marginalised identities. For instance, a qualitative study by Duran (2021) on queer students of colour suggested that this population often develops resilience by navigating both racism and homophobia in educational settings. This process fosters unique strengths, but also necessitates supportive systems to mitigate the compounded stressors that they face, which can be problematic as they may face barriers to accessing shared LGBTQ+ community resources due to racial oppression (Duran, 2021).

2.2.2. The levels of resilience: Individual and community

Resilience in LGBTQ+ individuals can be categorised into two main types: individual and community resilience. Individual or internal resilience refers to personal coping mechanisms that individuals develop, such as self-acceptance, self-care, defining themselves, and seeking professional support, or qualities that they possess that help them cope with stress (Erickson-Schroth & Glaeser, 2017; Meyer, 2015). For instance, a qualitative study on gay and bisexual young men in Kenya by Harper et al. (2021) identified the following intrapersonal resilience processes: sexual identity, confidence in themselves, self-love, drawing on support from religious and spiritual beliefs, adaptive coping, successful navigation, awareness of their legal rights, financial stability, and satisfaction from advocating for the community. These processes were found to play a crucial role in promoting holistic wellbeing (Harper et al., 2021).

Community resilience, on the other hand, is "the ability to access community resources that promote well-being and coping" (Parmenter et al., 2021, p. 630). These resources can be both tangible, such as support groups and specialised help centres, and intangible, such as validation (Meyer, 2015). This form of resilience goes hand-in-hand with individual resilience, and both are necessary for adequate coping. In fact, even individuals with high individual resilience may be at a disadvantage in the absence of community resilience resources or the ability to access them (Meyer, 2003). For individuals with multiple marginalised identities, accessing community resilience may be particularly complex, as they may have access to resources from the different minority communities that they belong to, but may simultaneously face more barriers in accessing these resources (Meyer, 2015; Gray et al., 2015; Parmenter et al., 2021). For instance, a qualitative study on gay Latino immigrants in the United States by Gray et al. (2015) found that community played a significant role in resilience, and those composed of others with the same intersecting identities were particularly valuable.

2.2.3. A critical approach to resilience

While resilience plays a vital role in understanding how LGBTQ+ individuals navigate adversity, resilience research has some critical limitations and potential downfalls. Firstly, many conceptualisations of resilience primarily emphasise the individual level, which risks downplaying the important contextual factors that shape an individual's ability to be resilient, and the structural inequalities that create the need for resilience in the first place (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2022; Meyer 2003, 2015). The increasing research focus on community resilience partially remedies this by broadening the focus and taking into account the environmental factors and social structures that influence resilience, rather than viewing the individual in a vacuum, but this still should not obscure the fact that the issue is rooted in systemic oppression (Meyer, 2015).

Another potential downfall of resilience lies in the potential burden that it places on individuals to be resilient. As mentioned earlier, emphasising minority person's role as a resilient actor rather than positive victims can represent a positive shift away from defining members of minority groups by their minority status, affirming their strengths and agency in interacting with society, and highlighting the important coping methods that they use (Meyer, 2003). However, this is a double-edged sword, as this framing can create an implicit expectation on minority members to be resilient, normalising the societal prejudice that they

face and placing the burden on them to cope and counteract it themselves (Meyer, 2003; Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2022). Consequently, when a member of a minority group fails to be resilient, this can be viewed as an individual shortcoming rather than a societal shortcoming (Meyer, 2003). While it is important to focus on resilience, as it is a crucial aspect of the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, it is also crucial to not idealise it or view it as a solution to the effects of societal prejudice. In reality, it is a band-aid that would not be necessary in the absence of the cisheterosexism and cisheteronormativism that underlies the discrimination and other minority stressors that pervade the lives of LGBTQ+ people.

Chapter 3: The present study: Research design and methodology

3.1. The present study

The present study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago, specifically the challenges that they face related to their identities and how they deal with them. As the field of LGBTQ+ psychology grows, theories such as the minority stress theory have fostered greater understanding of the negative impacts of cisheterosexism and cisheteronormativity on the lives of members of the community. In a rapidly changing global social climate surrounding LGBTQ+ rights, where there have been dramatic positive and negative shifts in even the last five years, there is a clear need for up-to-date research on this population. However, there is a dearth of recent research on the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Trinidad and Tobago, or even the wider English-speaking Caribbean context, leaving the specific experiences of these phenomena in this population unclear. Thus, this study sought to contribute to filling in this gap by answering these specific research questions:

1) How do LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago experience prejudice related to their identities?
2) What strategies do LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago use to confront, cope with, and challenge prejudice related to their identities?

3.2. Participants and procedures

The present study involved 21 LGBTQ+ adults who are from and currently living in Trinidad and Tobago. The age range was from 19 to 60 years old (M = 32). The sample was diverse in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation and racial/ethnic identity. In terms of gender identity, eight participants self-identified as cisgender women, three as cisgender men, three as non-binary, one as a non-binary woman, one as trans-masculine, one as both trans-masculine and autigender, three as women but with some degree of fluidity, and one participant chose to not label her gender identity. Regarding sexual orientation, eight self-identified as bisexual or pansexual, five as lesbians, three as queer, three as gay, one as both lesbian and queer, and one chose to not label her sexual orientation. Finally, as for racial/ethnic identity, six participants self-identified as Black or Afro-Trinidadian, eight as Mixed, four as Indian or East Indian, and two as White or Caucasian. Racial/ethnic identity

information is missing for one participant. The full participant demographics are reported in Table 1, using pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used for the study, and participants were recruited in a variety of ways. The primary recruitment method was a flyer that was shared through social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook with the link to a pre-screening survey on Google Forms, but a few were also recruited through word of mouth and direct request to acquaintances to either participate or share with their friends. I then reached out to participants via either Whatsapp or email, depending on the contact method that they provided me with, to schedule the interview.

The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were as follows: (1) 18 years or older, (2) currently living in Trinidad and Tobago, (3) either born and raised in Trinidad and Tobago, or has spent such a significant part of their lives living in the country that they consider themselves to be from there, (4) identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Table 1

Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual orientation	Pronouns	Gender identity	Racial/Ethnic identity
Rachel	26	Queer	she/her	Cisgender woman	White/Caucasian
Farida	25	No label	she/her	Cisgender woman	Indian
Renee	19	Pansexual	she/her	Cisgender woman	Mixed
Alyssa	21	Bisexual	she/her	Cisgender woman	Afro-Trinidadian
Jada	30	Pansexual	she/her	Cisgender woman	Black
Kyle	28	Gay	he/him	Cisgender man	Mixed
Malaika	20	Queer	she/they	Non-binary woman	Afro-Trinidadian
Aiden	27	Pansexual	they/them	Non-binary	Mixed
Dianne	56	Lesbian	she/her	No label	Caucasian
Damian	29	Bisexual/pansexual	he/him	Trans masculine, Autigender	Black
Tiana	28	Bisexual	she/her	Cisgender woman	Mixed
Amelia	25	Lesbian	she/her	Cisgender woman	Afro-Trinidadian
Chelsea	32	Lesbian/queer	she/they	Non-binary	Mixed
Shannon	26	Bisexual	she/her	Cisgender woman	Mixed
Stephanie	27	Queer	she/they	Maybe woman, maybe non-binary[a]	Mixed
Lisa	60	Lesbian	she/her	"Female to make it easier for everybody"[a]	–[b]
Nicholas	45	Gay	he/him	Cisgender man	East Indian[c]
Anish	50	Gay	he/him	Cisgender man	Indian
Jasmine	33	Lesbian	she/her	Woman, but could be fluid[a]	Afro-Trinbagonian
Cameron	32	Lesbian	he/him	Trans masculine	Mixed
Michelle	28	Pansexual	they/them	Non-binary	East Indian[c]

Note. n = 21. Participants were on average 31.76 years old (SD = 11.33).

[a] These participants did not give straightforward answers in response to the gender identity question, so in order to avoid imposing labels on them that may be inaccurate, I am reporting their responses verbatim or closely paraphrased.

[b] Information was not collected as the interview was incomplete.

[c] East Indian is a term synonymous with Indo-Trinidadian, with the adjective "East" used to distinguish members of this group from the indigenous peoples of the country.

3.3. Data collection method and procedures

The data collection method was a semi-structured interview. I conducted all interviews one-on-one over the video conferencing platform Zoom. The shortest interview was 27 min long, and it was the only interview that lasted less than 40 min. The longest interview lasted 1 hr 40 min. The average length of interviews was 66 min. One interview (with "Lisa") was incomplete, but the interview, which lasted 1 hr 35 mins, is still included in the analysis as nearly two-thirds of the questions were answered and it still provided rich data.

Before the scheduled interview time, I sent each participant a document with the informed consent information and a detailed overview of the study. Then, at the beginning of each interview, I verified the participant's understanding of all information, made any necessary clarifications, and answered any questions. I received explicit verbal consent from every participant before beginning the interview. Every interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed.

The first draft of the interview protocol was developed through careful review of literature and consideration of the cultural context. The draft was then adjusted with the guidance of social psychologist Dr. Sara Santilli, as well as comparisons with interview protocols from previous qualitative studies on similar topics, such as that by Parmenter et al. (2021), which was publically available, and that by Gray et al. (2015), which I obtained by reaching out to the first author. Then, I conducted a pilot interview to test the questions, and later made slight adjustments for the sake of clarity, effectiveness and flow, based on feedback from the participant and on observations made during the interview.

The final interview protocol consisted of 16 main questions, with attached follow-up questions, centered around four general themes: (1) conception of identity; (2) community connection and participation; (3) perception and experiences of societal prejudice; and (4) coping strategies.

Some example questions and follow-up questions were:

- How would you describe yourself in terms of your sexual orientation and gender identity? How important is being [self-defined identity] to who you are as a person?
- Do you feel like a member of the LGBTQ+ community?
- How do you think LGBTQ+ people are viewed in your immediate community?
- Do you consider yourself to be "out"?
- Are you involved in any groups for LGBTQ+ people?
- Was there a moment in your life in which you felt discriminated against on the basis of [self-defined identity]? How have you coped with these experiences?
- What does the term resilience mean to you? Would you consider yourself resilient?

In the nature of a semi-structured interview, some follow-up questions were pre-defined based on potential answers to the questions, but in every interview I also asked specific follow-up questions that were tailored to the participants' responses. The flexibility of this structure allowed me to probe deeper into the participants' responses, particularly those that were unexpected, and ask for clarification when necessary.

3.4. Data analysis method

I analysed the interview data with thematic analysis, which is a qualitative data analysis method that involves "systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57).

First, the interviews were transcribed and carefully read through for understanding and to ensure accuracy. During the transcribing process, I carefully removed all personally identifying information from each transcript, such as the participants' names, their places of work, and organisations in which they are involved, in order to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant. Considering the small population size of Trinidad and Tobago, retaining confidentiality was an important priority to protect the participants' privacy and safety.

Then, I manually open-coded each transcript, employing a primarily inductive or bottom-up approach, extracting the codes from the data themselves rather than categorising them into predetermined codes or frameworks. However, as Braun and Clarke (2012) point

out, it is not possible to approach data from a purely inductive approach devoid of any prior assumptions or theoretical knowledge. Therefore, I also employed a partially deductive approach to ensure that the codes were relevant to the research questions of the study. In addition, I approached the analysis process with the minority stress framework and its relevant constructs such as proximal and distal stressors in mind, but I did not explicitly aim to fit the codes into these categories. The initial coding process resulted in a total of 219 codes, which were then grouped into 14 clusters and used as the basis for analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings

Through the coding process, I identified six broad themes: (1) Varied family dynamics of non-acceptance and support, (2) Experiences of discrimination in public spheres, (3) Exclusion and discrimination within the LGBTQ+ community, (4) Navigating identity disclosure and self-expression, (5) Psychological and emotional impact of prejudice, and (6) Resilience and resistance. Table 2 presents the themes and their related subthemes, where applicable. An in-depth explanation of each theme follows.

Table 2

Themes and subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
1. Varied family dynamics of non-acceptance and support	a. Direct and indirect rejection b. Conflicting messages c. Shifting views and growing openness
2. Experiences of discrimination in public spheres	a. Harassment, violence and judgement in public b. Discrimination within institutional settings c. Gendered and hierarchical discrimination
3. Exclusion and discrimination within the LGBTQ+ community	No subthemes
4. Navigating identity disclosure and self-expression	a. Selective disclosure b. Policing self-expression c. Double lives
5. Psychological and emotional impact of prejudice	a. Mental health consequences b. Anticipatory stress c. Internalised stigma and internal conflict
6. Resilience and resistance	a. Individual resilience and resistance b. Community-based support c. Advocacy and activism

4.1. Varied family dynamics of non-acceptance and support

The topic of family was present in every interview, but family dynamics related to participants' LGBTQ+ identities varied greatly. Whereas the majority of participants reported that their friends were fully accepting of their LGBTQ+ identities, the reception of family members was much more mixed. The level of acceptance from family members varied greatly between participants and often even for the same participant, with experiences ranging from openness and support, to rejection and abuse. Religion often played a key role in the tensions surrounding LGBTQ+ acceptance, as did the age of the family member.

Three subthemes were identified under this theme, representing three different manifestations of the complex family dynamics that participants experienced: (1) Direct and indirect rejection, (2) Conflicting messages, and (3) Shifting views and growing openness. For some participants, their families' responses fell into all three of these categorisations, highlighting the complex and nuanced nature of family dynamics.

Subtheme 1: Direct and indirect rejection

Nearly half of the participants (n = 10) described all or some family members currently expressing a lack of acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities. This view was sometimes tied to religion, with the view of any identity or lifestyle outside cisheteronormative standards as "against God" (Farida, no sexual orientation label, cisgender woman). Sometimes, this rejection was not specifically directed towards the participant, but was expressed in the form of disapproving comments and views about the community as a whole that signalled to the participant that they would not accept their identity if they disclosed it.

On the other hand, this rejection was sometimes direct. This direct rejection was in the form of expressed disapproval and beliefs that it was wrong, complete denial of their identities, saying that they did not want them to be gay, and even threatening to shun them. Family members also enacted rejection by pressuring participants to stifle their gender expression, or restricting their freedom so that they would not spend time with same-gender partners or other LGBTQ+ people. One participant, Aiden (pansexual, non-binary), described experiencing physical abuse from their father due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. They also described their family's disapproval of them wearing feminine clothing, and refusal to accept their queer identity because it conflicted with their idea of them:

> And yeah they said stop wearing women's clothing. Yeah just basically telling me, "That's not you. Don't do that. That's not you." And I showed them a picture of me in

> it … And I was like, tell me this is not me? And I showed them and they couldn't. They kind of started welling up. It's just that they can't accept because of what they think is me.

This rejection impacted participants' relationships with their families in significant ways. For instance, one participant, Malaika (queer non-binary woman) described being outed to her mother against her will, which "imploded my family life and my relationship with my mom", dramatically changing it and resulting in a period where her mother did not let her go anywhere, as well as emotional abuse. Another participant, Shannon (bisexual cisgender woman), described how her mother's negative reaction to her coming out has forced her to come to terms with the possibility that her relationship with her mother may not always be the same:

> But I think this specific thing with my mom has actually been really really hard, like throughout the past two years, like really real rollercoaster, starting to come to terms with different things, for example, like about my relationship with her. You know, maybe it was always like I always took for granted that she would always be there and we'd always be great. But starting to come to terms with some realities that okay maybe that's not the case, maybe she would always be there, but it wouldn't always be as close as it was.

This highlights the ways that one's family not accepting their queer identity can influence family relationships and dynamics, sometimes robbing them of the sense of security and support that may have otherwise been there.

Subtheme 2: Conflicting messages: reluctant "acceptance" and double standards

Another subtheme that was identified in some interviews (n = 7) was the sometimes conflicting messages that participants received from family members regarding their identity and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. Family members were sometimes tolerant of or "okay" with the participant's sexual orientation or gender identities but did not fully accept them. In some cases, this meant questioning the validity of participants' identities and choices, insisting that it may be a phase, and expressing disappointment. In others, this reluctance was signified by a "don't ask don't tell" (Michelle, non-binary, pansexual) mindset, which signified tension underlying a mutually agreed upon peace in order to remain in each other's lives and avoid conflict. For example, Lisa ("female to make it easier for

everybody", lesbian) described how her mother's three-decades-long journey to be okay with her sexuality has culminated in an overall avoidance of the topic:

> It took my… it took my mother 30 years to be okay and talk to a partner that I had at that point in time. So 30 years to accept me. And I don't even think I'm accepted because it's not something we discuss. I don't talk about my life.

Another conflicting message that participants received from their families was a seeming double standard in views of the LGBTQ+ community. Sometimes this meant family members showing support to the participant but being homophobic or transphobic to other LGBTQ+ people, but most of the time it was the opposite, with family members being accepting of other LGBTQ+ people in their lives, such as friends or extended family members, but drawing the line at accepting the participant. For instance, Tiana (bisexual cisgender woman), described how her mother was accepting of her niece's sexuality, but not of hers:

> My mom is fine with my cousin, her brother's daughter being gay … She came out to my mom and my mom is very open, so I figured I could come to my mom about it. My mom would be like, "No. No, not for you."

This double standard was a source of confusion, frustration and hurt for participants who experienced it, leaving them wondering why their family members could not extend to them the understanding and openness that they showed other people.

Subtheme 3: Shifting views and growing openness

Not all family responses were negative. More than half of the participants described that some or all family members were either fully supportive of them or were at least trying to be more open and understanding (n = 13). For some, this was the result of a long journey and represented a drastic change from their initial reaction. For instance, Chelsea (non-binary, queer/lesbian) describes the dramatic shift that their father's reception to their sexuality had undergone over the years, shifting from extreme disapproval to extreme support:

> And for me, when I first came out and I was like 16 or 17, my dad was very, very homophobic. But now, he's like, so supportive. Like, he's like super dad. Like, if Trinidad and Tobago had PFLAG, he could be like the president at this point. And it's really heartwarming and beautiful to see his development and understanding and just growth and open mindedness.

This indicates the sometimes fluid nature of family dynamics. For some, this was still an ongoing journey, and even though their families were still not fully supportive or accepting, they were "dealing with it in their own time" (Damian, trans masc and autigender, bisexual/pansexual), and on an apparent trajectory towards growing acceptance and support.

4.2. Experiences of discrimination in public spheres

The majority of participants (n = 17) reported experiencing discrimination in a variety of public spheres, ranging from interpersonal to institutional. The treatment and level of prejudice that participants experienced sometimes varied based on gender and other intersecting identities. Three subthemes were identified under this theme: (1) Harassment, violence and judgement in public, (2) Discrimination within institutional settings, (3) Gendered and hierarchical discrimination.

Subtheme 1: Harassment, violence and judgement in public

Two-third of participants (n = 14) reported experiencing some form of harassment, violence and judgement in public motivated by their LGBTQ+ identities and expressions, both verbal, non-verbal and physical. Participants described receiving unwanted attention and harassment in public in response to visible queer expression. These reactions were sometimes in response to participants looking visibly queer in some way, such as through dressing in a non-gender normative way, or public displays of affection with their partners. Sometimes, these were merely "weird looks" (Chelsea, non-binary, queer/lesbian; Jasmine, lesbian woman, but could be fluid), "judging, passive looks" (Tiana, bisexual cisgender women), and stares. Sometimes, this involved differential treatment or bad service. At other times, participants were verbally harassed, heckled or laughed at, and received microaggressions and speculative or disapproving comments from strangers. Cameron (trans masculine lesbian) described receiving unwanted attention and verbal harassment in public in response to his masculine gender presentation:

> Still don't really feel that safe to walk without a group and just be yourself. Me, I will be on guard most of the time. I walking the street, I don't really mix and mingle with a lot of people. I go get what I have to get and come back. I don't pay attention to hecklers. I just be alert and on edge most of the time. Because as I'm masculine presenting, it is a cause for stares and a lot of people talking about, "What's that really walking? What's that?" That's reality.

Participants also experienced invalidation and identity erasure, with people telling them that they were confused, asking them to justify their identities, or just denying their identities completely. For instance, Damian (trans masc and autigender, bisexual/pansexual) described his gender identity being erased and ignored by members of his community, even as he lives openly and goes further along in his transition:

> But even when I communicate with people, there's just like no acknowledgment at all, like not even, a, you know, ask or nothing. It's just, "you are a straight woman." I was like, okay. Like, I notice that a lot with people in my immediate community further along in my transition. It's like, okay, so y'all are really, like, a woman is just anything. A woman is anything as long as I fit in that category. And that's what it feels like has been happening. So it's just a completely erasure.

For some participants, this discrimination included violence and threats of violence. Chelsea an LGBTQ+ activist, described the danger of holding a public position, having experienced physical assault and received death threats, particularly by members of religious groups:

> And then there have been instances where I've had like threats, like actual people threatening to kill me because I am gay or saying things like I'm putting children at risk of being gay … So it's definitely a scary place to live and just do day to day life.

In addition, two non-binary participants (Chelsea; Michelle, non-binary, pansexual) described being groped in the chest by strangers in public who wanted to check if they were a boy or girl. Another participant, Lisa (lesbian, "female to make it easier for everybody"), also described being stalked and harassed by a stranger for weeks.

Subtheme 2: Discrimination within institutional settings

A number of participants (n = 10) also described their experiences of interpersonal and systemic discrimination within a variety of institutional settings, like school, the workplace, healthcare and in the laws of the country.

In the school setting, a few participants described witnessing both teachers and students and endorsing cisheterosexist views or saying homophobic or transphobic statements, particularly in religion classes. Others described experiencing more direct discrimination from both teachers and students related to their sexuality. For example, Malaika (queer non-binary woman) described being called a transphobic slur by a volunteer parent teaching a class, teachers expressing and endorsing cisheterosexist views, and even

being falsely accused of sexual assault. They spoke of the intersectionality of these experiences, with the view of them as predatory and masculine intrinsically linked to them being dark-skinned and having a medium-sized build. Another student, Alyssa (bisexual cisgender woman), described an experience in school where school officials singled out suspected LGBTQ+ students and called in their parents, essentially hosting an intervention and treating them like they did something wrong, creating a climate of judgement, unsafety and ostracization. Another, Michelle (non-binary, pansexual), was denied entry to other secondary schools for sixth form due to being open about their sexuality, and also faced ostracisation and being viewed as a predator.

Furthermore, participants spoke about healthcare barriers and experiences of discrimination within the healthcare system. This included lack of access to affordable LGBTQ+-friendly mental healthcare, and barriers to accessing or unavailability of gender affirming care such as top surgery. Participants also spoke about healthcare professionals in the public healthcare system being unprepared to deal with LGBTQ+ patients. For instance, Cameron (trans masculine lesbian) described disclosing that he is a lesbian to a nurse to explain that there was no possibility of him being pregnant, and the nurse preaching scriptures that say that homosexuality is a sin to him in response. However, he noted that his experiences with the healthcare system have improved since then:

> I mean that in the health though, health department actually has changed a lot, where that's concerned. So they do ask and it's not as difficult to say whether or not you're a member of the LGBTQ community. It's not as difficult. You don't have to be scared. They know how to deal with you now. That has changed.

Several participants also described experiencing workplace discrimination, both in the hiring process and as an employee. For some, this meant dress code policies that restricted their gender expression, forcing them to conform to gender norms. One participant, Michelle (non-binary, pansexual), described an ongoing battle within a past workplace where a superior attempted to enforce a gendered dress code on them, which escalated to the point of them challenging the company in court. An added challenge in these situations was the absence of proof for discrimination, and uncertainty of how to evaluate the situation. Lisa (lesbian, "female to make it easier for everyone") also described difficulty finding a job, and a suspicion that her role as a public figure within the LGBTQ+ community may have been the reason why she was not getting any offers. Another, Nicholas (gay cisgender man),

described being held back from promotions at his job for years due to his sexuality, but being unable to prove it:

> I felt for a number of years, I was held back with regards to my progress in work on that basis. I felt as though, um, I didn't get my promotions because of that. So I had to take the bull by the horns, so to speak, and push and fight. And I got through eventually, of course, I got through. But there was a period that I did think that I was. And sometimes you just don't have the evidence, but your gut just tells you this is what it is because it can't be anything else.

The absence of anti-discrimination laws for LGBTQ+ people in Trinidad and Tobago also leaves individuals in a particularly vulnerable position. Michelle described challenging the aforementioned workplace dress-code discrimination in court, and the judges refusing to rule on the case:

> And I guess they were trying to stay away from setting that type of precedent, seeing that there's nothing in our laws here that protect somebody like me against discrimination at work. Or discrimination in general because the equal opportunities act does not cover sexual orientation or gender identity.

This highlights the failure of the judicial system to protect LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination.

Participants also spoke about the role of laws in shaping societal prejudice and the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, citing on one hand the positive change of the buggery law being repealed, and on the other the discriminatory laws still in place, such as that barring gay people from entering the country. For example, Kyle (gay cisgender man) spoke about the way in which the lack of equality in the laws of the country impact his freedom to choose how to build his family, and how he plans for the future:

> I'd say, being like from a perspective of a gay man, I think, you know, marriage equality is like a big thing. I get upset because I'm like, if I were to want to get married to a foreigner, like they can't come and they can't get no visa because of our marriage it won't be recognized, or if I wanted to adopt a kid. So that's why I say, not just about like how I live day to day, but like when I think about my goals for the future, what I want, or where I want to live, I think it's a big impact as to, like what my visions for the future are. Because I do feel those things won't necessarily change anytime soon.

Subtheme 3: Gendered and hierarchical discrimination

Another subtheme that was identified in the majority of interviews (n = 12) was the perceived heterogeneity of the level and forms of prejudice directed towards the different subgroups in the community. Many participants described perceiving how "there's almost like degrees of depravity associated with queerness" (Malaika, queer non-binary woman), with different groups experiencing forms of prejudice that varied in both type and intensity, implying a sort of hierarchy of prejudice, often differentiated along the lines of gender.

Many participants, notably all women, expressed the idea that queer women experience less discrimination than queer men. As Jada (pansexual cisgender woman) commented: "There's still going to be the same overarching hate and fight, but the fight, I feel like it's less of a fight when it comes to women." This exemplifies the perspective that was evident in some interviews that, even though the LGBTQ+ community is often grouped together and faces shared challenges, the societal prejudice towards queer women in Trinidad and Tobago is less severe. Relationships between women were described as receiving less hostility, particularly from men, than those between men. However, this was because they were invalidated and viewed as less legitimate, often "sexualized" (Renee, pansexual cisgender woman; Shannon, bisexual cisgender woman; Malaika) or viewed as a "fetish" (Renee; Jasmine, lesbian women but could be fluid). For example, Renee explained her experience of this double standard in the reception to her relationship with her girlfriend:

> But what I did realise is that the reason people are cool with my relationship, or like what I have is because I'm in like a lesbian relationship with my girlfriend. So it's way more accepted—in Trinidad, that is—to have a girlfriend than it is for males to be gay and together. They're a lot more frowned upon. Like, I would tell people that I have a girlfriend and they're like, "Oh, that's cool, but I don't want no man coming around me" and I'm like, "How is this even part, like— how we reach to that?", you know? But that's pretty much it because our relationship is sexualized. So a lot of men look at our relationship as like a fetish. Rather than accepting our relationship for what it is, like, a genuine relationship, you know?

However, despite this view that women generally have an easier time, multiple participants reported experiencing various forms of gendered discrimination and violence. A few female participants reported uncomfortable experiences with men after disclosing their sexuality or when out with their partners, such as being stared at or harassed—for instance, men asking if they could "join". Some also experienced men expressing a desire to turn them

straight or insisting that they just have not been with the right man yet, indicating the invalidating, sexualising views that queer women, or people perceived by society as women, face. An extreme example of this came from Chelsea (non-binary, lesbian/queer) who described being raped by somebody that she knew who “wanted to make me straight”, a phenomenon known as corrective rape.

On the other hand, there was a recurring idea that queer men faced more hostility. Some linked this to the fact that queer men, particularly those with more feminine presentations, defied traditional societal views of masculinity, as well as to the presence of laws that specifically target same sex male relations, such as the now-repealed buggery law. For instance, Kyle (gay cisgender man) spoke about hypermasculinity as “the major issue when it comes to gay men’s insecurities”, and described how this climate created feelings of discomfort for him in a team sport setting, leading to him leaving the team:

> And honestly, I would say being a queer person in a very hyper-masculine setting is always mad uncomfortable … Ultimately, I think how uncomfortable I felt in that space was actually one of the reasons why I ended up having to leave. I think that was the one drawback I did feel being a gay person is like being around like other hypermasculine, Caribbean, especially Caribbean men.”

Some participants also expressed or implied the fact that gender minorities are viewed in a worse light than sexual minorities. Damian (trans masculine and autigender, bisexual/pansexual) described his perception that societal views towards the LGBTQ+ community in Trinidad had changed, but not necessarily for the better in all aspects, as increased acceptance of sexual minorities had come at the expense of increased hostility towards gender minorities:

> In a way, sometimes it feels like because a lot of the heat is more on trans people now that like non-trans members of the LGBT community become more acceptable by proxy. And it feels like some of that has happened. Like in the interests of throwing down the non respectable queers, like the respectable queers, you know, quote on quote, have been pedestaled a lot more. It feels like that has caught on.

This indicates that societal prejudice changing and evolving is not necessarily always a positive thing, and that views towards one group within the community may not always extend to other parts of the community.

4.3. Exclusion and discrimination within the LGBTQ+ community

In addition to the discrimination experienced from wider society, some participants also reported experiencing mistreatment within the LGBTQ+ community, such as biphobia, racism and ableism. Even though this topic was only raised by one-third of participants (n = 6), I have identified it as a theme because it highlights the additional or intersecting stressors that a minority within this minority group may face, leaving them doubly marginalised: both by wider society and the LGBTQ+ community.

A couple participants described experiencing and witnessing biphobia from other members of the community. For example, Alyssa (bisexual cisgender woman) described feeling "othered" and invalidated by other LGBTQ+ individuals due to being bisexual. Here, she describes one such experience in an LGBTQ+ support group that she used to be part of:

> And you know, when that happened in that space in particular, I had felt that me and the members of that group … all had mutual respect for each other. … So after months of, you know, being in the space and talking about our experiences as queer people, to be told that… "yeah, but you don't really like, it's not as serious for you, and it's not much of a big deal, and you could just simply make a choice to not experience this life", it really hit. It actually really hurt. It felt— I don't even want to say betrayal, but I was like, "Wow, I thought we were friends, and I thought we all had respect and understanding."

This stringent view of what it means to be fully part of the community was also reflected in Rachel's (queer cisgender woman) experiences of her identity being invalidated and being excluded from queer spaces because she is less sexual, so they "didn't believe" that she was queer: "It's kind of like I'm not gay enough, which is kind of weird." Aiden (pansexual, non-binary) also described hesitance in disclosing that they are polyamorous due to being invalidated and misunderstood by other members of the community.

In addition, Damien (trans masculine and autigender, bisexual/pansexual), described his experiences of ableism within the community as an autistic person:

> I get more pressure from being autistic than I get for being trans. Because, like, even within LGBT communities here, again, if you cannot make it socially, you will be left behind. And I know because, like, I have pulled myself up to catch up so many times and like, catch up, and… there is no subsection of the LGBT group for people who not really social like that. It's either you come in this fete, you come in this party, or

> whatever whatever, or you stay home. … I face less trouble for being trans honestly. Because most of the time people just don't think it's real. So they just ignore it altogether. But like autistic traits, people could sniff that shit out. And if you never say you're outright bullying somebody because they're autistic, it's okay to do it.

For some participants, on the other hand, the within-community exclusion was race-related. Rachel, who is Caucasian, described being dismissed as a potential partner on the basis of her race. Additionally, Malaika (queer non-binary woman), who is Afro-Trinidadian, described encountering anti-Black racism within the community:

> So, I ended up with this person that was trans, but White being like, "Oh, all Black men are this, that and the other." And I was like, "I didn't say all Black men. And also, how are you qualified to have this discussion with me? … You present and interact with a lot of people as a white woman. So my experience and your experience are incredibly different. And I'm telling you, I'm speaking from this is a really deep running social ill that has produced Black men that act in this specific way. So I don't know what you want to say right now." And it was a whole back and forth. And then I was like, oh, maybe this community isn't for me. Like, I am queer and very community oriented. But maybe this one is not for me."

This highlights the exclusion and discomfort that individuals may face within the community, limiting their sense of community connection as well as their ability to draw on the community as a source of support.

4.4. Navigating identity disclosure and self-expression

The question of whether and how to disclose their LGBTQ+ identity was a complex decision for many participants (n = 16), often highly dependent on assessing their environment or the particular person for level of safety. The ability to successfully navigate was as a strategy that participants employed to avoid or minimise experiences of discrimination, and some even cited it as a possible reason why they have experienced little to no discrimination. Three subthemes were identified within this theme: (1) Selective disclosure, (2) Policing self expression, (3) Double lives.

Subtheme 1: Selective disclosure

One way in which the majority of participants (n = 13) navigated this issue was by being selective about who they disclosed their identity to and in what situations in order to remain safe or avoid conflict. This still held true for 7 out of the 14 participants who

considered themselves to be living mostly openly. This selective disclosure looked like choosing carefully who to tell about their identity, evading questions about their identities or dating life, or not correcting people who wrongly assumed their gender or the partner's gender. In describing the way they approached this decision, they used language like "sus out the situation" (Farida, no sexual orientation label, cisgender woman), "read the room and understand the people you're around" (Renee, pansexual cisgender woman) and "tread very carefully" (Amelia, lesbian, cisgender woman). A few noted that they were particularly hesitant to disclose their identities in professional settings. For example, when I asked if he considers himself to be out, Nicholas (gay cisgender man) explained his selective approach:

> I'm comfortable being me. I'm comfortable being gay. I don't wear it on my sleeve. If I'm approached and asked, it depends on who is asking because you might get a cuss out for being nosy, or I will answer and said yes. Right? I kind of put up my defences depending on who, depending on who. In my place of work, I tend not to address it because I don't want any… tension. It's not something I would want to have because not everybody is mature to deal with.

This highlights the fact that the decision of whether to disclose one's sexuality is not always related to self-acceptance or internalised stigma, but rather represents a complex decision-making process that is highly dependent on contextual factors.

Subtheme 2: Policing self-expression

Another facet of the challenge of navigating identity disclosure and outness that was identified in some interviews (n = 7) was participants policing their level of self-expression in order to control how queer they appeared. Like the decision of whether to disclose their identity, this did not always necessarily coincide with how open they were about their sexual orientation or gender identity, but was rather an issue of safety.

For participants whose gender expressions differed from their sex assigned at birth, the decision of how to dress sometimes presented a daily challenge, particularly in public spaces where they could not control who would see them. For instance, Aiden (pansexual, non-binary) described not being able to wear the more feminine clothes that they would like to when travelling:

> But I'm also… because of experiences within Trinidad and I travel a lot, like, I'm on my feet. I don't have a car anymore. … So my experience in travelling, sometimes even, like, I wear crop tops a lot and to me that's not femme, like? I want to wear a

> dress. But you can’t, you can't do that. You can't do that as someone male representing in Trinidad.

In Trinidad and Tobago, “travel” often refers to using means of transportation like taxis and buses. As this excerpt suggests, participants without private transportation options may face increased risks of vulnerability.

Another area of concern was public displays of affection with their partners, and multiple participants described needing to limit their displays of affection with their same-gender partners when in public settings. Chelsea (non-binary, lesbian/queer) described this concern, and the way it conflicts with their otherwise extreme openness:

> I'm as out as out can be, I think. Yeah. I'm very out. Like, I'm so out that sometimes I have to remind myself that we still live in a majority homophobic country and I need to, like, be careful of my actions, like, not hold my partner's hand in public or try to kiss them or something like that because it could become a safety risk, but for me it's like, I'm here, I'm queer what are you going to do about it?

Finally, some participants described policing their self-expression in a more general sense, such as through their speech and mannerisms. For example, Anish (gay cisgender man) described purposely learning to come across as straight, despite considering himself to be out, to which he also ascribed the fact that he had not experienced severe discrimination: “I don't come across as, you know, I’m not effeminate, so I don't come across. I've learned to hide it, to come across as straight.” This connects to the issue of hypermasculinity described by other participants, demonstrating another way in which this societal expectation impacts the lives of queer men.

Subtheme 3: Double lives

For some participants (n = 5), living openly in some spaces while needing to conceal their identities, stifle their self-expression or otherwise sideline their LGBTQ+ self in others meant needing to go between two different worlds: their queer life and their non-queer life. Most of the time, this “extreme polarisation” (Aiden, non-binary, pansexual) was between family life and friends. For example, Tiana (bisexual cisgender woman) described how her parents’ lack of acceptance necessitates a sharp distinction between how her queer identity manifests in her home life compared to other spaces where she can be more open:

> And then I find that I have to like separate, when I get home, I'm very reserved, I do what is expected of me, I try not to step outside of bounds, I don't have certain

> conversations at home. I don't entertain— my gay friends do not come over at all at all at all at all. So that’s times when I have to separate who I am and what I do.

Maintaining the schism between these two worlds meant different things for different participants, such as avoiding any LGBTQ-related topics, monitoring their language to not sound too queer, and actively lying.

4.5. Psychological and emotional impact of prejudice

The above experiences of discrimination, rejection, and other challenges impacted the majority of participants (n = 17) psychologically and emotionally in some way. Three subthemes categorising these impacts were identified: (1) Mental distress and exhaustion, (2) Fear and anticipatory stress, (3) Internalised stigma and internal conflict.

Subtheme 1: Mental distress and exhaustion

The majority of participants (n = 12) spoke about how experiences of discrimination, both direct and indirect, were distressing or exhausting in some way. For some, they caused or exacerbated mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, and reduced their daily functioning. For example, Rachel (queer cisgender woman) described how her physical assault reversed her mental health progress and made her unable to go to classes. In addition, Malaika (queer non-binary woman) spoke about how a particularly hurtful statement of rejection from her mother “plunged me into a real deep depression.” Cameron (trans masculine lesbian) also described how deeply his experiences of discrimination and rejection affected him when he was younger:

> Although I wasn't much one of hiding myself, I internalised everything. So I became more inside, I never used to go anywhere, stay home, watch TV. Depression hit me really bad a couple of years ago. Because you just don't understand how just me being me, how it could make all the positive interactions we have before, how it could cancel out. You didn't know who or what I was before, as soon as you find out, it’s this big case. So I didn't deal with it very well, especially as a young. I didn't take it very well.

Discriminatory experiences, such as hearing cisheterosexist comments, particularly from those close to them, were described as painful and hurtful. Rachel described the hurtful effect of hearing derogatory comments about the LGBTQ+ community from her family:

> So when you have that kind of bond and closeness, anything that your cousin or family would say, even if it's not even directed towards you, anything that's derogatory or anything, that will really hurt.

Participants also described the exhaustion that came with having to deal with discrimination and navigate the realities of living in an unaccepting environment. This included exhaustion from needing to advocate for themselves and attempting to challenge prejudiced views, especially with people that aren't receptive, and the general exhaustion of needing to consider the role of their identity in everyday life, which Shannon (bisexual cisgender woman) explained:

> I think that's been my biggest frustration. When people, whether it be like professionally or personally or whatever other way, when people make me feel like this tiny part of my identity, it like outweighs just all these other things about me or just the fact that I'm a regular human and living my life. Like why does there have to be so much focus on that? Or the conversation has to be steered that way or anything like that? Like it's just kind of exhausting.

Another source of distress for participants was the need to conceal their identities, whether in public or from loved ones. This took a toll on their mental well-being and on their relationships. As Malaika explained, when speaking about hiding her relationship from their mother:

> It makes you feel kind of hollow, like you're living half a life. I don't like to lie. Right? I don't like to lie. Like I said, dishonesty and love cannot coexist, and I always prefer to love. So it starts to feel a little destructive. It feels like it's eating you out from the inside, you know?

Subtheme 2: Fear and anticipatory stress

In addition to the distress and pain experienced after or during discriminatory experiences and challenges, many participants (n = 9) also experienced distress, fear and stress when anticipating discriminatory experiences. This anticipatory stress was present in both public spaces and private life for participants, leading to a pervasive sense of unsafety. For example, Malaika (queer non-binary woman) described being "filled with dread and anxiety" every time they are in public with their partner, out of fear of being seen by their mother or someone who may tell their mother.

Included in this anticipatory stress was fears for the future, including anticipating future rejection from their communities if they ever come out, and uncertainty about what their future will look like or how they will deal with potential future discrimination. For example, one of Tiana's (bisexual cisgender woman) biggest challenges related to her queer identity was considering her future family. She described the uncertainty of how she would navigate raising a child with a same-gender partner in a discriminatory environment:

> Well, I think it's really just not knowing what the future holds for you as a member of the community. Not just mentally and whether they would accept you, but how do you parent a child with another person of the same sex or somebody who identifies otherwise. How do you grow a child to be able to answer those questions? How do you grow a child to be able for them to deal with those societal, you know, pressures and prejudices?

This demonstrates how past firsthand or secondhand experiences of discrimination, and even just awareness of societal prejudice, can create stress-inducing expectations of future discriminatory events.

Subtheme 3: Internalised stigma and internal conflict

Furthermore, a number of participants (n = 8) described having experienced internal conflict and tension, sometimes linked to internalised stigma and cisheteronormative societal pressures. These created difficulty in accepting themselves and being their true selves. For example, Kyle (gay cisgender man) spoke about how, despite being comfortable in his sexual orientation, he still struggled with societal expectations related to hypermasculinity, which fostered insecurities and affected his perception of himself:

> I think personally, I subconsciously feel like this need to be more straight-presenting. Even though I think I naturally am, whether that's a benefit or not. I think especially in like in public settings, where I think you need to be, it definitely affects your behavior, I would say, in public settings where you need to be like less flamboyant. You need to be act a certain way because you don't want to be perceived as gay. … Even though despite like me being so very comfortably gay, existing in society very comfortably as an openly gay man and everything like that, I still do feel like my insecurities or the ways that it affects me, how I think about myself and how I behave and how other people perceive me.

In addition, a few participants discussed still struggling with internalised stigma about the LGBTQ+ community, sometimes questioning whether it was right to be gay and struggling to accept themselves. These struggles stemmed from religious teachings, and the environment that the participants lived in themselves. As Renee (pansexual cisgender woman) said, “I think if I wasn't living in Trinidad … I'd be more accepting of my own self.” Additionally, Anish (gay cisgender man) described noticing how living in the part of the country that he lives in, which he described as "a very straight world", was shifting his views of the community:

> I don't know, I sometimes, I actually, like I notice myself look at some things on say, for example, YouTube or even with this guy, Richie Jackson on Instagram. And I found myself questioning if… is it right to be gay. … Yeah, it’s even hard for me to verbalise that. I don't think I ever verbalised that. It makes me wanna cry.

This internalised stigma and the influence of societal pressures always represented a point of tension, as, for the most part, participants accepted themselves and the LGBTQ+ community, or at least they wanted to. This made the journey towards self-acceptance and being comfortable in oneself a sometimes challenging one, involving internal conflict.

4.6. Resilience and resistance

Finally, all participants employed strategies to cope with and challenge prejudice and its mental health consequences, on both the individual and collective levels. This highlights the active role that participants often took in confronting societal prejudice and protecting themselves against the effects of minority stress.

Most participants (n = 18) viewed themselves as resilient to some extent, with some considering it a trait that they had no choice but to develop in order to deal with the stress and challenges of life, both related and unrelated to their LGBTQ+ identities. As Michelle (non-binary, pansexual) commented, “there are so many challenges alone people in the community just navigate in regular life … you have to be resilient in order to navigate those things.” Resilience, for some, was not so much a positive trait as it was a necessary survival mechanism for surviving everyday life, without which they would be at a greater disadvantage.

An in-depth description of the types of strategies and forms of support that participants utilised follows, categorised into three subthemes: (1) Individual resilience and resistance, (2) Community-based support, and (3) Advocacy and activism.

Subtheme 1. Individual resilience, coping and resistance

On the individual level, nearly all participants (n = 19) drew on various internal resources and employed individual strategies to cope with and resist societal prejudice. These strategies helped participants to navigate difficult situations, and mitigate, process and withstand the mental effects of discrimination. Many participants (n = 11) attributed their resilience to internal strengths and traits, such as confidence, stubbornness, independence, creativity, self-acceptance, level-headedness, and being secure in themselves. As Jasmine (lesbian, woman but could be fluid) explained: "So I think that I just kind of overall instilled– was instilled from my mother and, you know, through myself, a certain level of confidence. And I just walk with that because I know I'm not hurting anybody, I'm a good person, whatever ,whoever I choose to love or like really isn't anybody business."

Participants also detailed an array of coping methods, which I have classified into three categories: protective withdrawal and avoidance, therapeutic and restorative strategies, and cognitive reframing. Protective withdrawal and avoidance, endorsed by 11 participants, entailed distancing oneself from prejudice and prejudiced people either mentally or physically, in order to minimise its mental impact. In interpersonal interactions, this sometimes meant ignoring or refusing to engage with prejudiced statements, and distancing themselves from prejudiced people. This is exemplified in a quote by Jada (pansexual cisgender woman): "I've literally stopped talking to people because they were homophobic," as well as a quote by Alyssa (bisexual cisgender woman): "With friends I mostly keep people around me who aren't homophobic, and if you are homophobic, I keep you at a distance, a big distance. Or I try to not interact with you whatsoever." In addition, participants sometimes avoided thinking about anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice, blocked discriminatory experiences from their minds, distracted themselves from prejudice by focusing on other things, and even considered or made plans to leave the country.

Therapeutic and restorative strategies, on the other hand, were the active strategies that many participants (n = 14) employed to nurture their well-being. Examples included seeking professional mental health assistance through therapy and psychiatric medication, being kinder to themselves, prioritising their own well-being, focusing on things that bring them joy, lifestyle changes like being active, and other strategies like journaling, writing, art, meditation and prayer.

Finally, cognitive reframing, endorsed by 10 participants, entailed shifting one's perspective on societal prejudice and the discrimination that they had experienced to

minimise their negative emotional impact. For example, accepting that prejudice exists and cannot always be changed, caring less what people think, not taking prejudice personally, and putting their experiences into perspective to feel gratitude for the fact that they had not experienced as severe discrimination as others or that they had the external and internal resources available to help cope with them.

Along with simply coping with the effects of prejudice, many participants (n = 11) also actively responded to discrimination on the individual-level through acts of resistance. This included advocating for themselves either through interpersonal interactions or through official avenues such as the justice system, standing up for themselves against prejudice, challenging prejudiced statements, and expressing their identity despite conflict or pushback. For example, Alyssa described choosing to wear masculine-presenting clothing despite her mother's disapproval:

> I'll just do my thing. I'm like, "If you're going to be angry, or if you're going to be upset, okay. I'm going to wear this and I'm comfortable wearing this right now, and I'm comfortable with the way I look. I'm happy with the way I look right now, and you don't like it. That sucks. That sucks. I'm sorry you don't like it, but—" and I am gonna feel kinda down. It'll sting. But like, at least outside, I'm like, "I'm gonna wear this, and I'm gonna do this, and I'm sorry you won't like it. But I'm me, and I'm not gonna— I can't do everything to please you. You know, I can't, everything I wear shouldn't be to make you happy. So be upset. But okay, I'm gonna do it anyway." So I think that's how I deal with those situations most of the time. And usually there's always a moment of tenseness, so a little argument or just not happy. So that's part of why, too, I mightn't do it all the time because I know there's something that's going to be said, so I just, like, calm down or just say, you know what? Not today. I don't want to pick that battle today.

This quote highlights a way that participants were not just passive victims of prejudice, but actively resisted it in everyday life. It also highlights a key strategy that participants employed in their everyday acts of resistance, which is picking their battles carefully, as not every situation was worth the time, energy, or threat to their safety.

Subtheme 2. Community-based support

Nearly all participants (n = 19) also drew on community support, both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+, to mitigate the effects of societal prejudice. For some participants, the

LGBTQ+ community was viewed as a key source of support. As Aiden (pansexual, non-binary) commented, “That's where comfort is. That's where support is. That’s where community, home, love, so much love and understanding.” Many participants primarily surrounded themselves with other LGBTQ+ people and non-LGBTQ+ people who are supportive of the community. The positive effects of being around other LGBTQ+ individuals or in LGBTQ+ spaces included feeling accepted and in turn being more able to accept themselves, as well as feeling understood. For example, Alyssa (bisexual cisgender woman) described the benefit of reaching out to her LGBTQ+ friends for support:

> You know, so I just talk to them about it, and, you know, we share— since we're similar, we all queer you know, there's, a solidarity and understanding of the experience, and I just feel comforted, you know, instead of talking to someone who completely doesn't get it or, you know, well, at least somebody that knows.

Being in LGBTQ+ settings was also beneficial for many participants as it provided a relaxing space free from the dangers, pressures and judgement of wider society, allowing them to “let [their] guard down and be whoever” (Kyle, gay cisgender man) and “not have to watch over [their] shoulders to see if [they were] safe or not” (Chelsea, non-binary, lesbian/queer). This included, for example, LGBTQ+ events, support groups and the pride parade. As Lisa (lesbian, “female to make it easier for everybody”) explained:

> As I used to tell people. When I'm in and around persons who are LGBTQIA, or I'm in an LGBTQI space, it’s quite like coming home. You know when you get home and you're *[exaggerated exhale]*... you exhale and you undress and you open yourself and you can be vulnerable and you don't have to worry about any— that is what it's like.

For some, this community support was reciprocal. Helping others in the community by providing support or creating a safe space was a way that participants coped with societal prejudice. For example, Rachel (queer cisgender woman) explained the personal benefit of providing support to her younger queer cousin: “I think helping my cousin helps me as well. Like helping them accept themselves helps me accept myself.”

In addition to support from within the LGBTQ+ community, participants also drew on support from other sources outside of the LGBTQ+ community, like family and friends. Some spoke about the benefit of leaning on other people in their lives for support, to talk about their challenges and process their emotions. As Stephanie (queer, maybe woman, maybe non-binary) explained:

I'm always reaching out to people in one way or another. Always trying to connect with people who I find or I cross paths with in life. Always trying to also reach out to friends that I already have. I lean on my family for support, talk to them.

For some, drawing on community support played a key role in strategies to protect their safety. Having other people around for protection in public was a way to avoid being harassed, or even just to feel more comfortable in uncomfortable situations. For example, Cameron (trans masculine lesbian) explained how he and his partner lean on support from their chosen family and biological family for security when in public:

So again, that same brother, he will be around. He is very protective of us. So he's there the majority of the time. My given family, they try as well. They are always around if we going somewhere. So we have that little additional security if anything.

Subtheme 3. Advocacy and activism

In addition to the resistance that participants demonstrated in dealing with their everyday stressors and challenges, another way in which the majority (n = 17) dealt with prejudice was through activism and advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community. One of the ways that many participants did this was through advocating for the community in everyday interpersonal interactions. This included challenging prejudiced views, educating people about the community, and being open to answering questions. For example, Alyssa (bisexual cisgender woman) described educating her friends in order to challenge their views of the LGBTQ+ community and correct misconceptions:

I very regularly talk to my straight friends who do have misconceptions or who aren't sure about certain things, and, you know, don't get this. Like, I try my best to say, "Hey, we should talk about this" or "that's not the experience" or have a conversation. And I think I do that pretty regularly at this point, enough where I feel like I've made an effort— not effort, I've made a change in the mindset of some people and have, you know, allowed them to widen their view of the queer community.

For some, living openly was also an everyday act of activism for the community. For example, Kyle (gay cisgender man) spoke about recognising that he was in a privileged position to be able to live openly without experiencing severe discrimination and exclusion, and thus believed it was important to use this privilege to create visibility for the community:

I think it's super important for me to live as an openly gay man because I understand the privilege that I have to live as an openly gay man. And that privilege affords me to

move through my life in the Caribbean openly gay without having to experience, like discrimination. And so I need to use that privilege in order to create visibility for the LGBTQ+ community. … And even though I do feel that hesitancy sometimes, I still do most of the times, almost all the time, push through that discomfort to be like, “No, I am gay, this is my life,” and yeah. Because I know ultimately it's not necessarily going to affect me much.

Other participants spoke about more formal forms of activism, such as leading LGBTQ+ organisations and initiatives to support the community and promote LGBTQ+ rights, organising events and spaces for the community, and promoting and attending these events as a way of supporting the community. For example, Dianne (lesbian, no gender label) discussed her role in organising diverse meeting spaces for the LGBTQ+ community, providing them with a space to connect to other members of the community:

> Just being able to give back and being able to create something for people who are unable, who are looking for, you know, the people that need this ... There are women who they don’t want to go to the parties. They don't want to go to the movie nights as such, but they want to come and sit down and talk and listen and participate and hear the voices. And I think that, you know, I feel a great sense of gratitude to be able to provide those spaces and to be part of it and to have these young people come and experience it because I didn't have that. And I think it's important.

Through these acts of advocacy and activism, participants challenged the cisheteronormative and cisheterosexist societal structures in Trinidad and Tobago, and drew on and contributed to collective strength and visibility of the community, pushing towards a more positive social climate for LGBTQ+ people.

Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to qualitatively examine the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago in order to understand how they experience, cope with and confront societal prejudice. The inductive thematic analysis led to the identification of six key themes that reflected the heterogeneous experiences of LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago. Specifically, the mixed levels of acceptance that participants receive from their families, their experiences of discrimination in wider society and within the LGBTQ+ community, the challenge of deciding when and how to be open with their identities, the mental health consequences of societal prejudice, and the strategies they use to cope with and resist prejudice.

A number of the external challenges that participants faced, including the experiences of discrimination and rejection from their families, in institutional structures and in the public sphere, are consistent with distal stressors in a minority stress theory framework (Meyer, 2003). In addition, some of the external challenges that transgender and non-binary participants experienced, such as misgendering and identity denial, are consistent with the 'nonaffirmation' distal stressor identified by Testa et al. (2015). In terms of proximal stressors, some of the challenges identified by participants, like anticipatory stress, internalised stigma, and navigating identity disclosure and self-expression, paralleled the three proximal stressors identified by Meyer (2003): internalised stigma, the fear of future discrimination or rejection, and concealing one's LGBTQ+ identity. The role of intersectionality was also evident, as participants spoke about the influence of various factors such as the part of the country they live in, their race, their specific LGBTQ+ identity and their gender in shaping their influences.

According to participants’ own evaluations of themselves, this was a particularly resilient sample. This mirrors the results of other similar studies such as that by Gray et al. (2015), in which the sample was also found to be particularly resilient. Apart from the self-evaluations, this resilience was also apparent in the multitude of strategies that individuals employed to deal with and cope with the manifestations and effects of societal prejudice. The majority of participants endorsed both individual-level and community-level resources, supporting the idea that both play a crucial role in resilience for LGBTQ+ individuals (Meyer, 2003). On the individual level, these resilience strategies and resources included

internal traits, protective withdrawal and avoidance, therapeutic and restorative strategies, and cognitive reframing. On the community-level, participants described mostly intangible resources such as self-acceptance and understanding, but some also mentioned tangible resources such as LGBTQ+ events. Additionally, the idea of resilience as a necessary survival mechanism rather than simply a positive trait, emerged in multiple interviews. This highlights the importance of taking care to not idealise resilience in LGBTQ+ populations at the expense of ignoring the systemic oppression that creates stressful conditions that necessitate resilience, as multiple authors have pointed out (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2022; Meyer, 2003, 2015). The activism and advocacy that the majority of participants engaged in, in organised and everyday ways, represents a way that LGBTQ+ in Trinidad and Tobago people work to proactively challenge these systemic issues, and presents an interesting area for future research.

Consistent with prior research on Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of the English-speaking Caribbean (e.g. Stephenson & Balwant, 2019; Stephenson et al., 2020; Mahoney, 2018), participants described the existence of pervasive societal prejudice, reflecting a cisheteronormative, cisheterosexist society. In addition, participants described experiencing gendered and asymmetrical forms of discrimination. Strict gender expectations about masculinity presented a challenge for queer men who defied these strict gender roles, consciously and subconsciously influencing them to adjust their self-expression in order to appease these societal expectations. On the other hand, queer women were described as being viewed in a less hostile manner, but faced sexualisation and fetishisation that reflected a pervasive misogynistic masculine perspective. These findings provide further evidence for the role of the patriarchy and hypermasculinity in enforcing and shaping anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice in the region (Stephenson et al., 2020).

However, of note is the fact that not every participant experienced any or much discrimination. Some participants described their families and communities as generally supportive, and were able to live mostly openly without experiencing severe discrimination that seriously affected their lives. Even though these participants represented a minority of the sample, this suggests that Trinidad and Tobago can present a hospitable environment for some LGBTQ+ individuals, and that there is a positive trend towards growing acceptance in the society as a whole. This change may be due to a variety of factors, such as the 2018 repeal of anti-LGBTQ+ laws (McNeal, 2023), and the work of other LGBTQ+ activists and

organisations within the region, such as CASIO: Sex and Gender Justice, the Silver Lining Foundation, Queer Corner Caribbean, Pride TT, and the Women's Caucus, to name a few.

This study had some limitations. Firstly, even though it was diverse in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation, the full spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities was not represented. The majority of participants were cisgender, and there were no trans-feminine participants. Considering the heterogeneity of experiences within these subgroups, it is important for future research to purposefully include a more diverse array of participants to gain further insight into the diverse challenges faced by different groups within the community. Another limitation is the recruitment method. First of all, the call for participants specifically asked for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, which may have excluded individuals who technically fall under this umbrella of non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender, but do not actively identify as an LGBTQ+ identity. Additionally, as the recruitment materials were promoted on the private social media pages of people within my network, this likely resulted in a constrained subset that does not represent LGBTQ+ people in the country as a whole.

This study provided possible future directions for research. Future research on this population can focus on ways to promote internal and community resilience in LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago, such as by increasing the availability of tangible community-level resources, as well as how to support LGBTQ+ individuals in their activism and advocacy efforts. In addition, the theme of exclusion and rejection within the LGBTQ+ community was not something that the interview questions were specifically looking for, but rather a topic that emerged organically. Therefore, this may be worth exploring more in-depth to gain further insight into the experiences of double marginalisation that some individuals within the LGBTQ+ community may experience, and how this may exacerbate minority stress and impede their ability to access community resilience resources.

5.2. Conclusions

This qualitative study examined the firsthand accounts of the experiences of LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago, in order to better understand their experiences with LGBTQ+-related prejudice, and the ways in which they dealt with this prejudice. Drawing on the assumptions of minority stress theory, I expected that anti-LGBTQ+ societal prejudice will have presented challenges for participants in multiple spheres of life, and that they will have developed a variety of strategies to confront these challenges. To answer the research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews, averaging 66 min each, with a total of 21

LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago. A primarily inductive or bottom-up approach was utilised in order to extract codes from the data itself rather than fitting them into a preconceived framework or pre-existing codes. However, as the aim and questions of the research were informed by minority stress theory, and the analysis was focused on answering the research questions, there was a deductive element as well.

In response to the research question of how LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago experience societal prejudice related to their identities, five key themes were identified. These themes provided insight into the varied levels of family support and rejection that they experienced, experiences of interpersonal and systemic discrimination in public spheres and within the LGBTQ+ community itself, the complex decisions and actions underlying the question of revealing one's LGBTQ+ identity, and the psychological and emotional consequences of these experiences. These findings highlight that societal prejudice influences the lives of LGBTQ+ people in Trinidad and Tobago in many ways, and these experiences are heterogeneous, varying depending on subgroup membership within the community and according to other specific identity factors like gender and race.

A sixth theme, related to the resilience and resistance of LGBTQ+ adults in the face of prejudice, was identified. This revealed the ways in which LGBTQ+ adults are not merely victims of societal prejudice, but also actively employ a number of strategies to cope with and challenge prejudice. On the individual level, various internal strengths were identified, as well as active and passive coping strategies, and individual acts of resistance against prejudice. On the collective level, community-based support from both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ communities was found to play a key role in participants' ability to be resilient. Finally, participants' were also found to respond to prejudice through activism and advocacy, taking an active role in challenging the negative societal attitudes against the community and fighting to dismantle the oppressive cisheterosexist, cisheteronormative societal structures that act as barriers against equality for the community.

This study provided novel insights into the lives of LGBTQ+ adults in Trinidad and Tobago. Even though the sample faced a wide variety of internal and external stressors due to societal prejudice, they were also largely resilient and utilised a variety of strategies to cope with and challenge this prejudice both reactively and proactively. This study also suggested that the landscape of LGBTQ+ acceptance in Trinidad and Tobago is complex and evolving. Even though societal prejudice was found to be prevalent in Trinidad and Tobago, and the vast majority of participants experienced some form of discrimination, some were able to live

mostly openly without their lives being significantly affected by prejudice, which provides a somewhat optimistic insight into the trajectory of LGBTQ+ rights in the country. The experiences and effects of prejudice were also found to be influenced by a variety of individual variables, suggesting the necessity of further investigation into the factors that affect individuals' experiences with prejudice and access to resilience resources. Future research can provide further insights into these differences and ways to promote resilience in this population. It is important, however, to look beyond the individual level at the wider societal structures that uphold and promote this prejudice, as well as the failure of social support systems such as the legal system to protect this population from discrimination. In this vein, future research can further examine and focus on ways to support the LGBTQ+-led resistance, advocacy and activism efforts that proactively seek to create systemic change and unravel the oppressive societal structures that necessitate resilience in the first place.

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