AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology

© 2023 American Psychological Association
ISSN: 2332-2101

2023, Vol. 9, No. 4, 373–391
https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000375

Internalizing the Poison: A Moderated Mediation Analysis of LGBTQ+ BIPoC College Students' Experiences With Intersectional Microaggressions

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As student bodies in higher education become more diverse, efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have also increased. Sexual and racial minoritized students are often systematically pushed out of higher education and currently report concerning dropout rates. Thus, research using an intersectional lens on oppressive experiences linked to academic outcomes is needed. This study aimed to unpack different types and levels of impact from intersectional microaggressions (racism and heterosexism) among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPoC) college students using an intersectional approach. Specifically, we assessed if the psychological distress associated with intersectional microaggressions mediated its relationship with school persistence. Additionally, we tested factors such as cisgender privilege, internalized racism, or internalized heterosexism as moderators for this model. Using a moderated mediation analysis (Model 13; Hayes, 2012), results supported our hypothesis that psychological distress helps explain (mediator) the link between intersectional microaggressions and school persistence. Furthermore, results for the first moderator—cisgender privilege showed this serving as a protective factor for cisgender people when experiencing these intersectional microaggressions. Results for internalized racism as a second moderator interacting with intersectional microaggression and cisgender privilege showed significant effects at all levels for gender-expansive participants, but not for cisgender participants. Finally, internalized heterosexism was a significant moderator for gender-expansive participants when experiencing intersectional microaggression in relation to psychological distress and school persistence. Our findings highlight immediate implications around education and well-being for LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students. We discuss limitations and implications that can better guide DEI efforts to serve these minoritized groups.

Keywords: intersectional microaggressions, psychological distress, school persistence, cisgender privilege, internalized racism

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This article was published Online First October 5, 2023.

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All authors for this submission have no known conflicts of interest, as well as no financial support or interest that directly or indirectly is connected to this study.

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The United States has become more racially, ethnically, and sexually diverse, according to the most recent census reports (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPoC) make up 42.2% of the U.S. population, with Latinx being the largest ethnic minoritized group (16.3%) followed by Black or African American people (12.2%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). About 8% of U.S. adults self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other sexually minoritized identities (LGBTQ+), whereas 50% identify as bisexuals, and about 12% as transgender (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2021). Similarly, student populations across U.S. colleges and universities are becoming more diverse (Hanson, 2021). Consequently, institutional conversations surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have demanded more attention and responsiveness to these shifts in student demographics (Barnett, 2020). However, scholars have argued that institutional DEI initiatives often come short of addressing the challenges marginalized college students face (Ballard et al., 2020). While enrollment rates for U.S. colleges have remained similar yearly over the last decade, retention rates, particularly for marginalized students, are decreasing (Hanson, 2021). Across BIPoC college students, 36% of American Indian, 35% of Black or African American, 27% Latinx, and 10% of Asian or Asian American students dropped out of college during the 2019–2020 academic year (ThinkImpact, 2021). Similarly, a 2022 national survey of LGBTQ+ college students showed that more than 25% have considered dropping out of school (Conron et al., 2022). College dropout rates for marginalized students have been linked to poor mental health (Conron et al., 2022; Watt et al., 2022) and discriminatory experiences (A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023; Devi, 2020). Thus, retaining marginalized college students is not just an institutional concern but a societal one. Organizations such as the American Psychological Association have recently called for better DEI frameworks that promote human dignity for all, including college students, and the use of intersectional lenses when addressing oppression (American Psychological Association [APA], 2021). Empirical findings on oppression in higher education are essential to inform DEI frameworks' development better. While research on oppression in higher education has been explored, a large portion of the literature focuses on institutional racism (see Bennett, 1995, for a review; Pozernick, 2022) and addresses oppression from one single angle (e.g., racism, heterosexism, sexism) for college students that in some cases have more than one minoritized identity (Aguilera & Barrita, 2021; A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023). Therefore, intersectional research methods exploring experiences with everyday discrimination—microaggressions in higher education are less explored. Our study aimed to address LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students' experiences with intersectional microaggressions (racism and heterosexism) and their link to school persistence (or lack of) and mental health. Additionally, we explored how factors such as cisgender privilege and internalizing strategies influence how LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students respond to intersectional microaggressions. To our knowledge, we are among the first to explore these relationships using a multiaxle model of different marginalized identities (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, cisgender) in connection with academic and mental health outcomes.

Intersectional Microaggressions

Microaggressions are everyday slights, conversations, or behaviors that carry a derogatory or dehumanizing message that aim to marginalize an individual (Sue et al., 2007). Minoritized groups such as members of the LGBTQ+ community or BIPoC are subjected to continuous, sometimes ambiguous attacks that reinforce and normalize systems of oppression such as racism and heterosexism. Racism is a system that centers on White identity and promotes discrimination, oppression, or persecution toward individuals of other racial or ethnic membership (Chang et al., 2023; Perry, 2007). Heterosexism speaks to a system that centers heterosexuality as the standard and discriminates against individuals with different sexualities (Neisen, 1990). Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) suggests how both racism and heterosexism operate at societal levels—macrosystems (e.g., systemic and institutional racism or heterosexism) and individual levels—microsystems (racial or sexual microaggressions). Macrosystems of oppression in higher education have been explored in the literature (Lazaridou & Fernando, 2022), yet

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less is known about microaggressions, particularly when these include multiple forms of oppression. The term "*intersectional* microaggressions" derives from the framework of *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991), which highlights how systems of oppression support one another. As such, studying oppression for marginalized groups should address these experiences from multiple angles (Crenshaw, 1991).

While Black scholars have led discussions on intersectionality for decades (Cole, 2009), the literature on intersectional microaggressions is much more novel and limited (Sadika et al., 2020). A recent systematic review identified only 16 peer-reviewed studies on this subject, primarily published in the last decade (Sadika et al., 2020). As indicated by Singh et al. (2021), one current barrier in this research area is a limited pool of available measures or scales that assess multiple axles of oppression. Particularly for racism and heterosexism, the literature suggests that LGBTQ+ BIPoC experience various forms of microaggressions, and their impact on psychological, physical, educational, and professional outcomes should be explored (Nadal et al., 2016). Recently developed quantitative intersectional microaggressions measures (Balsam et al., 2011; Fattoracci et al., 2021) have allowed the field to move forward. Recent findings suggest LGBTQ+ BIPoC experiencing intersectional microaggressions also report adverse health (Abreu et al., 2023; García, 2021; Sadika et al., 2020) and academic outcomes (A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023; Duran, 2019; True-Funk et al., 2021).

The Impact of Microaggressions

Microaggressions are daily stressors that negatively impact marginalized individuals (Sue et al., 2019). Recent literature reviews have shown a strong link between microaggression and poor mental health (Barrita, Strong, et al., 2023; A. M. Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023; Williams, 2021; Wong et al., 2014; Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2020, 2022, 2022a). However, most of the literature on microaggression rarely use intersectional methods in their studies (A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2021). Racial microaggressions have been associated with symptoms of depression among Black adults (Cheng et al., 2021; Hall & Fields, 2015) and stress among Latinx and Asian Americans (A. Barrita, 2021; Torres-Harding et al., 2020; Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022b). Racial microaggressions have also shown a causal relation to poorer self-esteem and higher physical stress (Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2017). Gendered racial microaggressions, another version of intersectional microaggressions, have been linked to higher anxiety among African American women (Wright & Lewis, 2020). LGBTQ+ people experiencing microaggressions also report poor mental health (Abreu et al., 2023; Nadal et al., 2016). Furthermore, under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, certain groups report experiencing microaggressions from other sexually minoritized groups (Tran et al., 2023). Recent findings show LGBTQ+ people of color experiencing intersectional microaggressions also reported using alcohol at higher levels when they had lower community support (Cerezo & O'Shaughnessy, 2021; Kler et al., 2023).

In higher education, BIPoC students reported high levels of racial microaggressions linked to racial battle fatigue (Hernández & Villodas, 2020). Similarly, environmental racial microaggression, such as lack of representation in the form of faculty of color, increases BIPoC students' sense of nonbelonging (Mills, 2020). In fact, BIPoC students report experiencing racial microaggressions at schools daily (Lee et al., 2020). LGBTQ+ students report experiencing microaggressions in higher education (Tran et al., 2023). LGBTQ+ youth often are subjected to bullying and harassment from their school peers (Abreu & Kenny, 2018) and report experiencing intersectional microaggressions (Abreu et al., 2023). In competitive academic fields such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics, women of color report experiencing intersectional microaggression (gender and race) more frequently than White women (True-Funk et al., 2021). Duran's (2019) systematic review of queer students of color found that these groups struggle to find support when experiencing intersectional microaggressions and lack safe spaces that dignify or acknowledge all their identities. Recent findings (A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023) suggest that LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students experiencing high levels of intersectional microaggressions also report attitudes to drop out, and these results change based on cisgender identity. Based on previous evidence of the psychological and academic impact of microaggressions, we explored these factors using a large, diverse sample of LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students.

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Cisgender Privilege

Cisgender privilege refers to unearned systemic advantages a cisgender person enjoys as a result of the alignment of their identity and perceived identity (see review in Richardson-Self, 2022). While research has focused chiefly on the experiences of heterosexual, cisgender people, some researchers have called for the need to address cisgender privilege within LGBTQ-specific research (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2021; Galupo et al., 2014), thus acknowledging that cisgender sexual minorities enjoy advantages that gender-expansive people do not (A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023). Specific to microaggressions, research shows that gender-expansive people experience microaggressions from within and outside the LGBTQ community (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2020; Rivera-Mercado et al., 2022). For example, in a study of 390 gender-expansive adults, Pulice-Farrow et al. (2020) found that participants were exposed to repeated microaggressions daily, such as being questioned about their identity by romantic partners. Furthermore, specific to educational settings, research shows that cisgender privilege is systematically sustained by cissexist policies, such as the lack of gender-neutral bathrooms and the lack of emphasis on students' pronouns (Woodford et al., 2017). These experiences of cissexism not only aim to erase the existence of gender-expansive students but also create hypervigilance in this community (Rider et al., 2022). A recent study (A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023) showed that among BIPoC sexually minoritized college students, cisgender people report higher persistence in school than gender-expansive students when experiencing intersectional microaggressions.

Internalized Racism

BIPoC experiences with racism, both systemic and individual, often are internalized (David et al., 2019). Internalized racism is the endorsement and acceptance of negative beliefs and stereotypes about oneself and one's racial/ethnic group rooted in White supremacy (K. D. Pyke, 2010). The manifestation of internalized racism can occur when an individual accepts these negative beliefs and stereotypes as true, question their abilities, express disgust and resentment toward themselves and their racial/ethnic group, and avoid their racial/ethnic group (K. D. Pyke, 2010). For instance, a qualitative study of second-generation (U.S. born with at least one foreign-born parent) Vietnamese and Korean American college students reported resentment toward same racial/ethnic peers who were described as the stereotypical nerdy Asian and saw them as undesirable friends and partners (K. Pyke & Dang, 2003). Furthermore, some participants in the same study reported being proud to be considered "whitewash" based on reported attitudes of assimilation to U.S. mainstream culture, such as not speaking their ethnic language or reinforcing White supremacy by equating White with American. These findings suggest that internalized racism is reinforced through daily interactions such as microaggressions (A. Barrita, Strong, et al., 2023; Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022a) that reflect more prominent societal stereotypes of certain racial/ethnic groups (e.g., perpetual foreigner stereotype).

While the literature has addressed the psychological implications of internalized racism (see David et al., 2019, for a review), it is also key to name specific forms of oppression related to this internalization. For example, among BIPoC, racism (and its internalization) will differ based on perceptions and assumptions of color and race—colorism. Colorism is a form of racial discrimination based on skin tone where Whiteness and anti-Blackness are centered (Adames et al., 2021; Hunter, 2013). Afro-Latinx people, for example, reported experiencing anti-Black racism from White and BIPoC communities, which often is internalized, leaving them feeling as if they do not belong to either group (Adames et al., 2021). Similarly, Black women constantly internalize discriminatory messages around their hair based on social concepts that set Eurocentric hair types (e.g., blond, straight) as more desired than others—hair texturism. BIPoC also internalize prejudice and degradation based on *featurism* when their facial features do not conform or align with Western beauty standards (Monk, 2021).

Internalized racism has been linked to a negative racial/ethnic identity, less connection to racial/ethnic community, and lower academic performance (Barrita, Chang, et al., 2023; David et al., 2019), particularly when experiencing microaggressions and psychological distress (Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022a). In a study of Black American adults, internalized racism

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was linked to lower career aspirations, including leadership roles, achievement, and continued education (Brown & Segrist, 2016). Similarly, in another study of Black Americans, internalized racism was negatively linked to education value, that is, more internalized racism was linked to lower importance of higher education (Brown et al., 2017). Another study also explored biased around immigration status for Latinx and Asian Americans based on xenophobic and anti-immigrant microaggressions and found how these two groups internalize these messages and report poor mental health (A. Barrita, Chang, et al., 2023). Thus, individuals who have a negative perception of their racial/ethnic identity report poor mental health symptoms and might endorse negative perceptions about their academic abilities as well.

Internalized Heterosexism

Internalized heterosexism (also called internalized homonegativity) refers to the negative attitudes and beliefs that sexual minority people have about themselves and other nonheterosexual people, including negative beliefs about same-sex attraction and relationships. It is important to note that internalized heterosexism results from oppressive societal messages about nonheterosexual people, not a person's character flaws or shortcomings (Meyer, 2003). Nevertheless, researchers argue that because of the prevalence of heterosexism in society, most sexual minority people are vulnerable to internalized heterosexism (Meyer, 2003: Shidlo, 1994), and most will experience internalized heterosexism in the forms of self-doubt, self-hatred, and destructive behaviors (e.g., engaging in substance abuse; Brubaker et al., 2009; Huynh et al., 2022), among others, throughout their lives. In addition, research has established the relationship between internalized heterosexism and negative psychological outcomes among sexual minority people to include lower self-esteem (Peterson & Gerrity, 2006), depression (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010), and suicidality (Puckett et al., 2017), among other outcomes.

Academic Persistence for Marginalized Groups

Academic persistence is students' perception of their ability to continue their education and work toward completing their degree at a university (Conger & Long, 2010). Several factors, such as a positive university environment, similarity between personal and university values, peer support, family and university staff, and self-esteem, are positively correlated with academic persistence (Gloria & Ho, 2003). In other words, students are more likely to continue their education in a safe and supportive environment. However, there are evident racial inequities between White and BIPoC students, such that students of color are less likely to stay in college and graduate (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022). For example, in a qualitative study at a predominately White institution, Black and Latinx American male college students reported they could not relate to the staff or faculty, and others stereotyped them as not capable of learning or succeeding in school, decreasing their sense of belongingness (Dulabaum, 2016).

Similarly, among LGBTQ students, several factors are linked to their academic persistence. For instance, LGBTQ students who experience sexual orientation microaggressions in the classroom also reported discomfort and intentions to transfer from the university (Crane et al., 2022). Beyond the classroom, LGBTQ college students' perception of a hostile college climate was linked to less satisfaction, more depression and anxiety, and less persistence (Szymanski & Bissonette, 2020). A large study (N = 3,000) of LGBTQ graduates suggested that a positive campus climate (e.g., supportive staff, faculty, and peers) was positively linked with better academic experience compared to those who experienced sexual and gender microaggressions (Garvey et al., 2017). Recent findings using intersectional approaches for research on microaggressions have presented evidence that these can harm academic and psychological outcomes (Abreu et al., 2023; A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023; True-Funk et al., 2021). Based on these findings, our study explores the relation between intersectional microaggressions, mental health, and school persistence for LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students while assessing factors such as cisgender privilege and internalization as moderators.

The Present Study

The present study used an intersectional approach to explore the relation between intersectional microaggressions and school persistence

among LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students. First, we assessed the possible roles and relations of psychological distress (mediator), cisgender privilege (moderator), internalized racism (moderator), and internalized heterosexism (moderator) to unpack further the dynamics of intersectional microaggressions and the effects on school persistence (see Figure 1). We assessed the LGBTQ+ BIPoC students' psychological distress as a mediating factor for the negative impact of intersectional microaggressions on school persistence. Next, we explored how cisgender privilege (first moderator) influences intersectional microaggressions' relation with psychological distress (path *a*) and with school persistence (path *c*) in our mediation model. Finally, we checked separately how internalized racism or internalized heterosexism (second moderator) changes the relation between intersectional microaggressions, cisgender privilege, and psychological distress. Based on these aims, we hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1: Psychological distress will mediate the relation between intersectional microaggressions and school persistence (mediation).

Hypothesis 2: Cisgender privilege will moderate the relation between intersectional microaggressions and school persistence (moderation).

Hypothesis 3: Cisgender privilege will moderate the relation between intersectional microaggressions and psychological distress (moderated mediation).

Hypothesis 4a: Internalized racism will moderate the moderating effect of cisgender privilege on the relation between intersectional microaggressions and psychological distress (three-level moderated mediation).

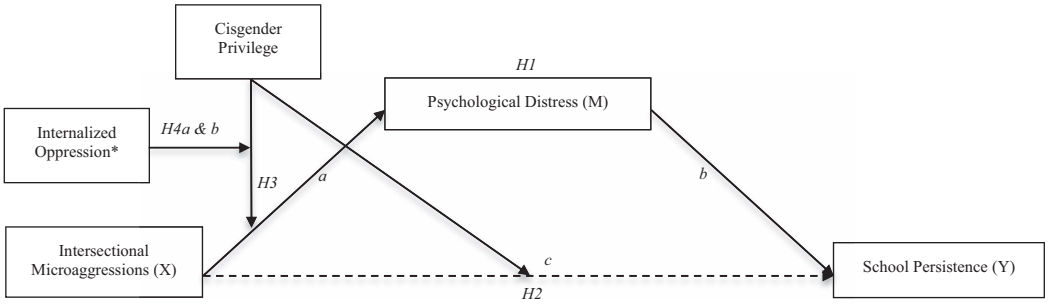
Hypothesis 4b: Internalized heterosexism will moderate the moderating effect of cisgender privilege on the relation between intersectional microaggressions and psychological distress (three-level moderated mediation).

Method

Participants and Procedure

The data for this study were collected in 2021 during two academic semesters (spring/fall) at a state-funded university in the southwest of the United States. The chosen school offered a convenient population, with over 60% of the student body being BIPoC and over 35% being LGBTQ, according to their 2020 annual report. The online study and protocol were approved by and in compliance with the institutional review board (UNLV-1634287) at a Southwest public university. Participants completed the cross-sectional study using an online survey in Qualtrics for course credit exclusive and were recruited from different psychology courses taught during both semesters in 2021. To participate, inclusion criteria included the following: (a) adults (18 years or older), (b) being a racially or ethnically minoritized student,

Figure 1
Conceptual Model



Note. Conceptual model of hypotheses exploring the moderating effect of cisgender privilege and internalized oppression (racism and heterosexism) on the relation between intersectional microaggressions, psychological distress, and school persistence. H1 = Hypothesis 1; H2 = Hypothesis 2; H3 = Hypothesis 3; H4 = Hypothesis 4.

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(c) being part of the LGBTQ+ community, and (d) fully speaking English. A total of 397 participants were initially recruited. The online survey included a consent form, various quantitative measures randomly shown, demographic questions, and a debriefing informative closing statement with mental health resources. The average time of participation was 28 min. Eight participants were dropped for failing to respond to attention checks accurately; therefore, our final sample consisted of 391 participants whose ages ranged from 18 to 55 years old (M_{age} = 20.37, SD = 4.37).

The ethnic or racial breakdown of our sample was primarily composed of Latinx participants (n = 240); 141 self-identified as White Latinx (36.1%), and 99 self-identified as Afro or Indigenous Latinx (25.3%). Additionally, 49 participants identified as Black or African American (12.5%), 92 self-identified as Asian or Asian American (23.5%), seven as Middle Eastern (1.8%), and three as Native American (0.8%). Around gender, 288 participants self-identified as cisgender (73.7%; 220 cisgender women and 68 cisgender men), and 103 participants self-identified as gender expansive (26.3%; 51 genderqueer, 46 nonbinary, and six transgender). For sexuality, 32 people self-identified as gay (8.2%), 34 as lesbian (8.7%), 181 as bisexual (46.3%), 73 as pansexual (18.7%), 69 as queer (17.6%), and two as asexual (0.5%). See Table 1 for a full breakdown by cisgender and gender-expansive identities.

Table 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 391)

Baseline characteristic	Cisgender (N = 288)		Gender expansive (N = 103)	
	n	%	*n*	%
Race/ethnicity				
White Latinx	110	38.2	31	30.1
Afro or Indigenous Latinx	74	25.7	25	24.3
Asian/Asian American	59	20.5	33	32.0
Black/African American	38	13.2	11	10.7
Middle Eastern	5	1.7	2	1.9
Native American	2	0.7	1	1.0
First-generation student				
Yes	50	43.9	16	41.0
No	64	56.1	23	59.0
Sexuality				
Gay	29	10.1	3	2.9
Lesbian	29	10.1	5	4.9
Bisexual	143	49.7	38	36.9
Pansexual	32	11.1	41	29.8
Queer	53	18.4	16	15.5
Asexual	2	0.7	0	0.0
Gender identity				
Cis man	68	23.6	0	0.0
Cis woman	220	76.4	0	0.0
Transgender	0	0	6	5.8
Genderqueer	0	0	51	49.5
Nonbinary	0	0	46	44.7

Measures

Demographics

Participants provided demographic information toward the end of the survey, including age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES).

Cisgender Privilege

Participants were asked if they identified as cisgender, followed by a brief definition: "a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their sex assigned at birth." Based on their responses (yes or no), the sample was divided into two groups: (a) *cisgender privilege* if they identified as cisgender and (b) *noncisgender privilege* if they did not.

Intersectional Microaggressions

The Intersectional Microaggressions Scale (Fattoracci et al., 2021) includes 36 Likert-style items quantifying different microaggressive experiences for LGBTQ+ BIPoC individuals. Participants responded to the question "How often does this occur to you?" using a scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*all the time*) for items such as "I was threatened because I am a person of color who is part of the LGBTQ+ community." Higher scores represent more frequent experiences with intersectional microaggressions. The Intersectional Microaggressions Scale has been used in similar studies showing strong reliability (A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023). For this study, Intersectional Microaggressions Scale showed Cronbach's α of .97.

Psychological Distress

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21; Antony et al., 1998) has 21 items that assess

symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. DASS is divided into three subscales of seven items each. Participants self-assessed their symptoms using a 4-point Likert-type ordered categorical scale from 0 (*did not apply to me at all*) to 4 (*applied to me most of the time*) for statements such as "I felt that I had nothing to look forward to." DASS showed strong reliability for this study (α = .91), mirroring scores of previous microaggressions studies (A. Barrita, 2021; A. Barrita, Strong, et al., 2023).

School Persistence Attitudes

The Persistence/Voluntary Dropout Decision Scale (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980) has 30 Likert-style items assessing students' persistent attitudes toward school. Items such as "I am satisfied with my academic experience at my university" are rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), where higher scores suggest more persistence and lower scores suggest dropout attitudes. Castillo et al. (2006) assessed microaggressions and Persistence/Voluntary Dropout Decision Scale, finding strong reliability for this measure (α = .86). For this study, Cronbach's α was .81.

Internalized Racism

The Emotional Response subscale in the Appropriated Racial Oppression Scale (Campón & Carter, 2015) is a seven-item measure that assesses internalizing emotions about one's race. Items such as "There have been times when I have been embarrassed to be a member of my race" were rated using a 7-point Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), where higher scores indicate higher internalized racism. Emotional Response subscale in the Appropriated Racial Oppression Scale has been used in other racial microaggressions studies (Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022a), showing strong reliability α levels (>.83). For this study, Cronbach's α was .87.

Internalized Heterosexism

The Short Internalized Homonegativity Scale (SIMS; Currie et al., 2004) is a 12-item measure that assesses internalizing emotions about one's sexual orientation. SIMS was originally used to assess internalized homophobia using the words such as "gay" or "homosexuality" in most of their items. For this study, the scale was adapted to assess internalized heterosexism by replacing a specific sexual orientation word (e.g., gay, homosexual) with a combination of words that would capture any sexually minoritized group, such as "my sexual orientation," "people with same sexual orientation as me," "LGBTQ+." In addition, the adapted SIMS includes items such as "Even if I could change my sexual orientation, I wouldn't" or "I am comfortable about people finding out about my sexuality," which participants reported their level of endorsement to each item using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*, where higher scores indicate higher internalized heterosexism. SIMS has been used in various mental health-related studies (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010), showing strong reliability (>.70). For this study, SIMS reported a Cronbach's α was .79.

Analyses

We used SPSS Version 28 to analyze our data. First, we conducted preliminary analyses and assumption checks to ensure the quality and readiness of the data for the main analyses. We used PROCESS 3.5 (Hayes, 2012) mediation analysis (Model 4) using a single model bootstrap approach to test if psychological distress mediated the relation between intersectional microaggressions and school persistence (Hypothesis 1). Next, using Hayes' Model 13 (2012; moderated mediation), we tested if cisgender privilege moderated the relation between intersectional microaggressions and school persistence (Hypothesis 2). Additionally, we tested if cisgender privilege moderated the link between intersectional microaggressions and psychological distress (Hypothesis 3). Finally, Hayes' Model 13 (2012) tests in path *a* for a second moderator; thus, we tested if internalized oppression (racism or heterosexism) acted as a second moderator for the moderated relation between intersectional microaggressions, psychological distress, and cisgender privilege. Specifically, this last model analysis was run 2 times to test internalized racism and internalized heterosexism separately as a second moderator.

Results

Preliminary analyses indicated normal distributions, and no significant outliers were found

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within our main variables. No signs of multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, or independence errors were found. We also conducted various chi-squares and *t* tests to assess if there were significant differences around gender since more than half of our sample was cisgender women and found no significant differences. Pearson's bivariate correlations for all continuous variables (see Table 2) showed that all main quantitative variables were significantly associated with each other. SES was positively associated with psychological distress ($r = .248$, $p < .01$) and school persistence ($r = .106$, $p < .05$); thus, we controlled for SES as a covariate in all main analyses. Finally, we assessed for possible moderation effects with a second Pearson's correlation analysis (see Table 3), splitting cases between cisgender ($n = 288$) and gender-expansive samples ($n = 103$). Results showed internalized racism was significantly associated with other main variables for both groups, but internalized heterosexism was only associated in the gender-expansive group.

Psychological Distress as a Mediator

To test Hypothesis 1, we used a mediation analysis with recommended bootstrapping procedure PROCESS Macro Model 4 (Hayes, 2012), where 5,000 bootstrap samples were used in the analysis. Results for path *a* indicated intersectional microaggressions were positively linked to psychological distress ($B = .310$, $SE = .032$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.248, .372]), path *b* results suggested that psychological distress was negatively associated with school persistence ($B = -.113$, $SE = .034$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [−.169, −.037]). Path *c* results suggested that intersectional microaggressions were negatively associated with school persistence ($B = -.623$, $SE = .021$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.664, −.581]). Results supported Hypothesis 1 for full mediational effect. Intersectional microaggression was no longer a significant predictor of school persistence after controlling for psychological distress ($B = -.670$, $SE = .021$, $p = .132$, 95% CI [−.020, .254]), consistent with full mediation. The predictors accounted for approximately 69% of the variance in our model ($R^2 = .689$). The procedure yielded a significant coefficient ($B = .047$, $SE = .012$, $p < .001$, with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals that did not include zero [.019, .068]). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported by results suggesting that the relation between intersectional microaggressions and school persistence is explained by the psychological distress linked to both.

Cisgender Privilege and Internalized Racism Moderated Mediation

We used PROCESS Macro Model 13 (Hayes, 2012) for moderated mediation analyses with recommended bootstrapping of 5,000 bootstrap samples accounting for SES as a covariate to test our moderators. First, Hypothesis 2 was tested in path *c* of the mediation model, where cisgender privilege was assessed as a moderator for the relation between intersectional microaggressions and school persistence. Results showed intersectional microaggressions were negatively linked to school persistence ($B = -0.803$, $SE = .062$, $p < .001$), psychological distress was negatively associated with school persistence ($B = -0.088$, $SE = .035$, $p < .05$), and being gender expansive compared to cisgender was also negatively associated to school persistence ($B = -0.180$,

Table 2
Bivariate Correlation Entire Sample

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. IMS	—					
2. School persistence	−.730**	—				
3. Psychological distress	.446**	−.294**	—			
4 Internalized racism	.555**	−.323**	.263**	—		
5. Internalized heterosexism	.372**	−.315**	.338**	.323**	—	
6. SES	.030	.106*	.248**	.341	.109	—
M	2.11	4.06	1.94	3.66	3.02	6.82
SD	1.07	0.80	0.74	1.19	1.35	1.25

Note. $N = 391$. IMS = Intersectional Microaggressions Scale; SES = socioeconomic status.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Bivariate Correlation Comparing Cisgender and Gender-Expansive Groups

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
Cisgender group[a]						
1. IMS	—					
2. School persistence	−.781**	—				
3. Psychological distress	.214**	−.142*	—			
4. Internalized racism	.507**	−.362**	.079*	—		
5. Internalized heterosexism	.067	−.070	.052	.054	—	
6. SES	.024	.078*	.214*	.019	.006	—
M	2.00	4.18	1.87	3.54	2.55	5.71
SD	1.01	0.80	0.71	1.21	0.92	1.21
Gender-expansive group[b]						
1. IMS	—					
2. School persistence	−.709**	—				
3. Psychological distress	.786**	−.546*	—			
4. Internalized racism	.647**	−.101*	.686**	—		
5. Internalized heterosexism	.785**	−.440**	.609**	.639**	—	
6. SES	.145	.152*	.2.07*	.142	.045	—
M	2.39	3.71	2.13	3.99	4.34	4.98
SD	1.18	0.82	0.80	1.12	1.47	1.18

Note. IMS = Intersectional Microaggressions Scale; SES = socioeconomic status.
[a]$N = 288$. [b]$N = 103$.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

SE = .005, $p < .001$). The interaction of intersectional microaggressions and being gender expansive was found as a significant moderator adding to the variance $\Delta R^2 = .055$, $\Delta F(1, 386) = 7.63$, $p = .006$, $B = -0.547$, $SE = .041$, $p < .001$. The overall model was significant, $R^2 = .721$, $F(4, 386) = 249.67$, $p < .001$ (see Table 4).

We assessed specific regions of the interaction of intersectional microaggressions and cisgender privilege (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean, at the mean, and 1 *SD* above the mean) to understand this relation better. We used simple slope analysis (Johnson & Fay, 1950) as this technique is considered superior to locating regions of significance for an interaction (Hayes, 2012). The interaction plot (see Figure 2) shows that participants without cisgender privilege (gender expansive) compared to those with cisgender

Table 4
Moderated Mediation Model Characteristics for Predictors on Psychological Distress (Mediator) and School Persistence (Dependent Variable)

Predictor	Psychological distress			School persistence		
	B	*SE*	[95% CI]	*B*	*SE*	[95% CI]
Intersectional MA (X)	1.248***	.314	[0.631, 1.86]	−0.803***	.062	[−0.926, −0.681]
Psychological distress (M)				−0.088*	.035	[−0.156, −0.020]
Cisgender privilege (W)[a]	−2.450***	.463	[−3.361, −1.539]	−0.548***	.115	[−0.773, −0.037]
Internalized racism (Z)	0.730***	.073	[0.393, 1.067]			
X × W (Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3)	−1.036***	.256	[−1.540, −0.532]	−0.182***	.005	[−0.220, −0.037]
X × Z	0.276***	.073	[0.132, 0.420]			
W × Z	0.485***	.127	[0.235, 0.735]			
X × W × Z (Hypothesis 4a)	−0.171**	.057	[−0.283, −0.059]			
Model R^2	0.337, $F(7, 383) = 27.83$, $p < .0001$			0.721, $F(4, 386) = 249.67$, $p < .0001$		
Interaction Δ^2	0.016, $F(1, 383) = 9.01$, $p < .003$			0.055, $F(1, 386) = 7.63$, $p < .001$		

Note. $N = 391$. W = first moderator; Z = second moderator; MA = microaggressions; *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval; X = predictor; M= mediator; Y = outcome.
[a] Compared to gender expansive.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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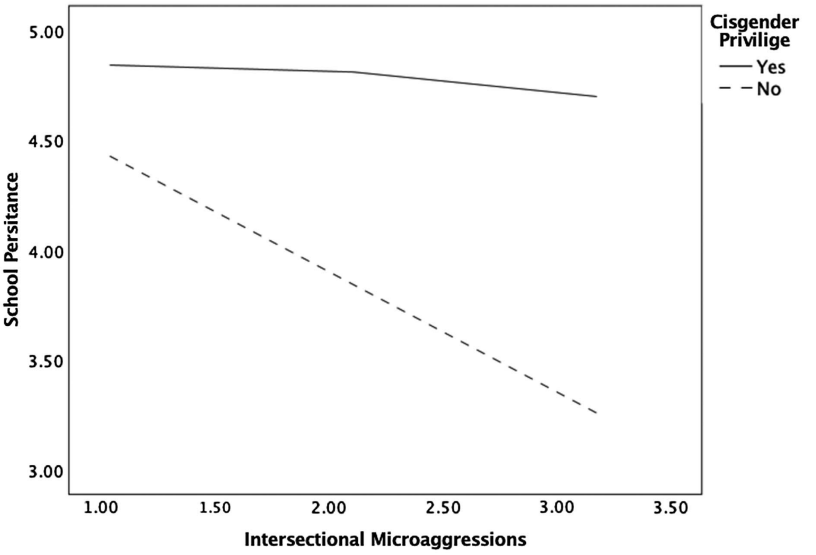
Figure 2

Moderating Influence of Cisgender Privilege on the Association of Intersectional Microaggressions and School Persistence



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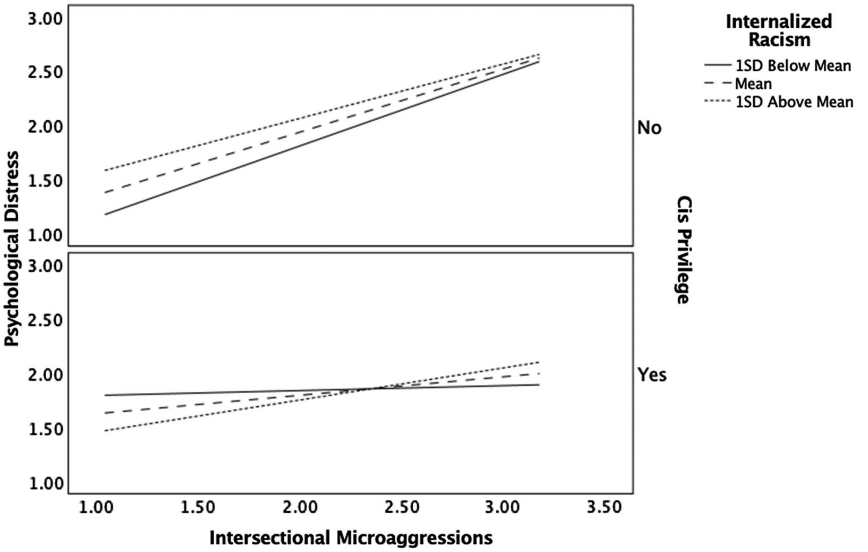
privilege experiencing intersectional microaggressions reported a significant effect on school persistence = −.547, *SE* = .047, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.629, −.465], where the more intersectional microaggressions experienced, the less school persistence was reported. However, when cisgender students experience low or average levels of intersectional microaggressions, there is no significant effect on school persistence = −.375, *SE* = .012, $p = .178$, 95% CI [−0.419, 0.012], thus cisgender privilege buffers the impact of intersectional microaggressions on school persistence. Only when cisgender participants reported high levels of intersectional microaggressions (1 *SD* above the mean), there is a small effect on school persistence = −.013, boot *SE* = .002, 95% boot CI [−.021, −.003]. These results suggest that cisgender privilege is a protecting factor when facing intersectional microaggressions supporting our Hypothesis 2.

We tested Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4a using the same Model 13 (Hayes, 2012) for path *a* of the mediation. Specifically, we tested if cisgender privilege moderated the relation between intersectional microaggressions and psychological distress (first moderator) and if there was a three-way interaction between intersectional microaggressions, cisgender privilege, and internalized racism (second moderator). Results revealed a significant effect for the model $R^2 = .337$, $F(7, 383) = 27.83$, $p < .001$ (see Table 4). Intersectional microaggressions were positively linked to psychological distress ($B = 1.248$, $SE = .314$, $p < .001$), being gender expansive compared to cisgender was also negatively associated with psychological distress ($B = -2.450$, $SE = .463$, $p < .001$), and internalized racism was positively linked to psychological distress ($B = .730$, $SE = .171$, $p < .001$). The interaction of intersectional microaggressions and being gender expansive was found as a significant moderator ($B = -1.04$, $SE = .256$, $p < .001$); thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported. For the three-way interaction (Intersectional Microaggressions × Cisgender Privilege × Internalized Racism), results showed a significant regression coefficient ($B = -.171$, $SE = .057$, $p = .003$). Therefore, Hypothesis 4a was also supported. This significant double moderator added to the variance $\Delta R^2 = .016$, $\Delta F(1, 383) = 9.01$, $p = .003$.

Simple slope analysis (see Figure 3) showed for all participants significant effect for the interaction of both moderators and intersectional microaggression 1 *SD* above the mean = .205, *SE* = .070, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.162, .439], and at the mean.410, *SE* = .061, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.193, .523]. However, when cisgender students report

Figure 3

Three-Way Interaction (Double Moderator) of Intersectional Microaggressions, Cisgender Privilege, and Internalized Racism Linked to Psychological Distress



Note. Cis = Cisgender.

low levels of internalized racism, there is no significant effect on psychological distress = .045, $SE = .051$, $p = .380$, 95% CI [−.056, .146].

Overall, our moderated mediation model was significant and supported our Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4a. Cisgender privilege moderated pathways *a* and *c*, and internalized racism was a second moderator in the path *a*, all showing significant indirect effects (Hayes, 2012). Table 5 shows the degree to which our mediation model was moderated by cisgender privilege and internalized racism, such that the indirect effect of intersectional microaggressions on school persistence through psychological distress is more substantial for gender-expansive lesbian, gay, bisexual & queer BIPoC college students compared to cisgender participants.

Internalized Heterosexism

Preliminary analysis showed internalized heterosexism was significantly associated with other main variables only for gender-expansive people; thus, there was no evidence to test a double moderation (cisgender privilege and internalized heterosexism), and therefore Hypothesis 4b

Table 5

Conditional Indirect Effects of Intersectional Microaggressions School Persistence Through Psychological Distress for Cisgender Privilege and Internalized Racism (Moderators)

Moderator	Indirect effect or index	Boot *SE*	Boot 95% CI
C	−0.675	.025	[−0.225, 0.025]
GE	−0.547	.042	[−0.629, −0.465]
Internalized Racism × C (1 *SD* below the mean)	0.004	.005	[−0.006, 0.013]
Internalized Racism × C (at the mean)	0.015	.006	[0.005, 0.027]
Internalized Racism × C (1 *SD* above the mean)	0.026	.010	[0.009, 0.046]
Internalized Racism × GE (1 *SD* below the mean)	0.058	.019	[0.022, 0.098]
Internalized Racism × GE (at the mean)	0.051	.016	[0.020, 0.083]
Internalized Racism × GE (1 *SD* above the mean)	0.044	.014	[0.017, 0.071]

Note. $N = 391$. *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval; GE = gender expansive; C = cisgender.

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was not supported. In a post hoc exploratory approach, internalized heterosexism was tested as a moderator for the gender-expansive sample (n = 103) using Hayes' (2012) moderated mediation Model 7 (see Figure 4). Results showed that intersectional microaggressions were positively associated with psychological distress (B = .904, SE = .094, p < .001), internalized heterosexism was positively associated with psychological distress (B = .196, SE = .063, p < .01), and psychological distress was negatively associated with school persistence ($B = -.776$, $SE = .106$, $p <$ .001). The interaction of intersectional microaggressions and internalized racism was found significant, adding to the variance ΔR^2 = .024, $\Delta F(1, 99) = 13.64$, $p < .001$, $B = .068$, $SE = .018$, $p < .001$. The overall model was significant, R^2 = .827, $F(3, 99) = 157.91$, $p < .001$.

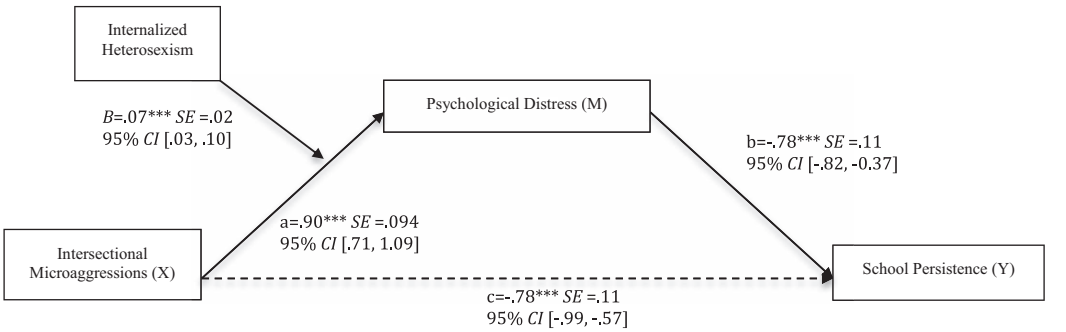
Discussion

Overall, our findings supported previous evidence on the impact of intersectional microaggressions (A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023) and suggested that these attacks are negatively linked with school persistence and mental health. In addition, findings from the mediation model supported our Hypothesis 1 and indicated that the psychological distress was a mechanism by which intersectional microaggressions negatively impacted school persistence among LGBTQ+ college students of color. That is, when we controlled for psychological distress (mediator), intersectional microaggressions were no longer significantly linked to school persistence; thus, the psychological cost of microaggressions helps explain why LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students might be at risk of dropping school. While psychological distress has been linked separately with intersectional microaggressions (Abreu et al., 2023; A. Barrita, 2021) or negative academic outcomes (A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023; True-Funk et al., 2021) in previous studies, to our knowledge, this is the first study exploring these three variables using an intersectional lens for an LGBTQ+ BIPoC college sample. Furthermore, we aimed to expand our model and amplify our intersectional approach by checking different moderators.

We tested our first moderator—cisgender privilege, in the mediated relation (path c) between intersectional microaggressions and school persistence (Hypothesis 2) and the relation (path a) between intersectional microaggressions and psychological distress (Hypothesis 3). Results supported Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 and showed that cisgender privilege was a protective factor when experiencing intersectional microaggressions. Specifically, for Hypothesis 2, gender-expansive participants reported lower school persistence as they experienced more intersectional microaggressions. In contrast, cisgender participants reported low school persistence only when the level of intersectional microaggressions was statistically high. Similarly, for Hypothesis 3, our results showed gender-expansive people reported an increment in psychological distress the more intersectional microaggressions they reported. In contrast, cisgender people only

Figure 4

Moderating Effect of Internalized Heterosexism on the Mediated Relation of Intersectional Microaggressions and School Persistence Through Psychological Distress for Gender-Expansive Participants



Note. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval.
*** p < .001.

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reported similar effects for average or high levels of intersectional microaggressions. Thus, cisgender privilege moderated our mediation model and provided evidence that being cisgender does offer some level of protection from intersectional microaggressions for both academic and psychological outcomes. These results support previous arguments suggesting the importance of exploring the effect of cis identity and privilege among sexual minorities (Galupo et al., 2014) and build on previous findings exploring cisgender privilege as a protective factor (A. Barrita, Hixson, et al., 2023).

Finally, we tested two other moderators separately, internalized racism (Hypothesis 4a) and internalized heterosexism (Hypothesis 4b), to expand our model using a three-axle intersectional approach. Previous evidence has suggested that marginalized groups sometimes internalize microaggressive experiences (Wong-Padoongpatt & Barrita, 2023; Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022a), and internalizing processes have been linked with poor mental health (David et al., 2019). Thus, we tested Hypothesis 4a and Hypothesis 4b separately in the path *a* of our moderated mediation model (Intersectional Microaggressions × Cisgender Privilege and Psychological Distress). Internalized racism (Hypothesis 4a) was a significant second moderator. That is, the triple interaction of intersectional microaggressions, being gender expansive and internalizing racism, was linked with higher levels of psychological distress, which mediated the relation with lower school persistence. On the other hand, the triple interaction of intersectional microaggressions, being cisgender and internalizing racism, was linked with psychological distress only when internalized racism was statistically high. While internalized racism impacts BIPoC (David et al., 2019), our results suggest factors such as cisgender privilege might reduce the impact of both intersectional microaggressions and their internalization. Therefore, interventions addressing this impact should adapt based on other individual minoritized identities.

Results for internalized heterosexism as a second moderator did not support Hypothesis 4b. Preliminary analysis showed nonsignificant associations between internalized heterosexism and other main variables among cisgender people. Given that we altered the measure used to assess internalized heterosexism around its wording, it is possible that aspects of the scale might have been compromised. However, reliability results did not suggest this. Post hoc analysis results showed that among gender-expansive people, internalized heterosexism moderates a mediated relation between intersectional microaggressions, mental health, and school persistence. However, future studies should aim to unpack internalized heterosexism using a measure, which, based on our literate review, is yet to be developed, that can better include diverse sexualities within the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Nonetheless, our finding does suggest gender-expansive people report some level of internalized heterosexism linked to psychological and academic outcomes.

Implications for Institutional and Academic DEI Frameworks

Our results provide evidence that can inform and better support DEI frameworks in educational and institutional settings. First, consistent with previous recommendations (APA, 2021), our findings highlight the importance of intersectionality when unpacking dynamics of oppression and speaking truth to power. DEI strategies should follow these models to create specific interventions for specific groups while considering those with multiple marginalized identities. Second, our results suggested LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students experience a concerning level of intersectional microaggressions. Educators and school administrators can adapt intervention strategies that consider not only systemic or institutional oppressions but interpersonal ones—like microaggressions—and promote equity and inclusion efforts, such as microinterventions (Sue et al., 2019). Promoting learning spaces that intentionally acknowledge and challenge oppressive experiences can make class environments more inclusive for students with multiple marginalized identities (Fuentes et al., 2021). Third, our deep investigations into the different moderators, such as cisgender privilege or internalized racism, provide a more nuanced framework for the interactive effects of power dynamics. Specifically, DEI strategies promoting safe spaces should consider how multiple marginalized (or privileged) identities might change how intersectional microaggressions impact students. Our findings around internalized oppression encourage promoting positive and inclusive language

within educational and institutional settings. Moreover, school administrators and educators might reduce internalizing effects on students with marginalized identities by endorsing more efforts to recruit and retain diverse and representative faculty and student bodies within higher education.

Limitations and Future Research

There are significant limitations to consider when interpreting our findings. First, our model used mediation and moderation analyses that assume a theoretical linear relation between intersectional microaggressions occurring before other outcomes. However, such directions cannot be confirmed as our study was correlational and cross sectional. Future studies should consider using experimental and longitudinal approaches to establish causal relationships better. Second, the interpretation and generalizability of our findings must be conservative as our sample was collected in one university and presented large portions of subgroups around gender, race, and sexual orientation. While our study compared cisgender to gender-expansive participants using a racially and sexually diverse sample, future studies should unpack differences around race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation when exploring intersectional microaggressions' implications. Furthermore, while we aimed to assess multiple forms of oppression and its internalization, we could not unpack specific forms of oppression within the concepts of racism and heterosexism, such as which ones are based on colorism or xenophobia. Future studies should incorporate methods that could explore these experiences more specifically. Finally, the measures used in this study to assess psychological impact were not developed to evaluate and separate oppression-related effects from other forms of distress. As such, future approaches should target using measures that can target psychological distress directly connected to oppression.

Conclusion

> Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until is faced.
>
> —James Baldwin

This quote by Baldwin, a social justice advocate, reflects that intersectionality allows hidden experiences within systems of oppression to come to light so that efforts of true DEI can better serve those often *forgotten* when referring to marginalized groups. Our results highlight different levels and types of impact from intersectional microaggressions among LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students using an intersection approach of multiple levels. This study aimed to provide empirical evidence of oppression within higher education. Our findings bring light to immediate implications for teaching and well-being for college students with multiple minoritized identities. This study is one of the first to explore combined systems of oppression and their link to psychological and academic outcomes. Our study can inform educators, school administrators, and policymakers about the various effects LGBTQ+ BIPoC college students experience from intersectional oppression and guide DEI efforts that better protect and dignify these minoritized groups.

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Received January 28, 2023
Revision received July 17, 2023
Accepted July 28, 2023 ■

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