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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Types of Discrimination as Predictors of Identity Concealment in a Sexual and Gender Minority Sample

Charlie Giraud[1,2] · **Michelle Leonard**[2]

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Abstract

The present study examined the role of different forms of discrimination (individual-level, institutional-level, and both types of discrimination) in predicting identity concealment behaviors in a sample of sexual and gender minorities (SGM; $n = 2296$) living in Eastern Europe. Both the choice to engage in identity concealment at all and the frequency to which an individual concealed their identity were regressed onto each type of discrimination. Results of a logistic regression revealed that those who had experienced individual-level, institutional-level, or both types of discrimination were more likely to choose to conceal their identity than those who did not experience discrimination. Using a multivariate regression, each type of discrimination was found to have a positive association with frequency of identity concealment, with those who experienced both types of discrimination showing the strongest association. However, when controlling for country, the association between institutional-level discrimination and frequency of identity concealment was no longer significant. These findings suggest that not all forms of discrimination may have the same impact on SGM individuals and that experiencing multiple forms of discrimination may have compounding effects on one's choice to conceal their identity and the frequency to which they engage in this behavior.

Keywords LGBTQ+ · Sexual and gender minority · Identity concealment · Minority stress · Discrimination

✉ Charlie Giraud
giraudca@mail.uc.edu

[1] Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA

[2] Department of Behavioral Sciences, University of Michigan-Dearborn, Dearborn, MI, USA

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Introduction

Discrimination

Discrimination has been described as "the intended or accomplished differential treatment of persons or social groups for reasons of certain generalized traits" (Salentin & Heitmeyer, 2020) and has been considered a significant source of stress for those who identify as sexual and gender minorities (SGM). The Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) differentiates between distal and proximal stressors, where distal stressors are external experiences of stigma, such as discrimination, while proximal stressors consist of internal experiences of stigma, such as identity concealment.

Regarding distal stress, experiences of discrimination have been shown to be associated with poor mental health outcomes in SGM individuals. Specifically, one review of minority stress and mental health in the SGM community found a consistent positive association between discrimination and psychological distress (Hoy-Ellis, 2023). Another review inclusive of various minority groups, including those in the SGM community (Vargas et al., 2020), found that discrimination and depressive symptoms had a positive association. A review of the impact of discrimination in transgender individuals found that experiences of discrimination were associated with increases in substance abuse, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and suicidality (Drabish & Theeke, 2022). Furthermore, previous research suggests that the frequency to which one experiences discrimination appears to amplify negative mental health effects, as more frequent discrimination has been shown to predict increased levels of anxiety and depression (Livingston et al., 2020). These findings indicate that individuals facing discrimination based on their minority identities are more likely to experience adverse mental health outcomes and that the risk of negative outcomes appears to increase with the frequency of discrimination.

Individual-Level and Institutional-Level Discrimination

Discrimination that one experiences can occur at various levels, including at the individual-level and the institutional-level. Individual-level discrimination involves the actions of individuals or small groups of people, as opposed to involving communities of people or institutions (Adams et al., 2018). Individual-level discrimination is interpersonal in nature and is usually targeted towards a specific individual or group of individuals based on their suspected belonging to a minoritized group. One study examining individual-level discrimination showed that experiencing discrimination at this level had a positive association with suicidality in sexual minority youth (Gordon et al., 2024). Alternatively, discrimination can happen at an institutional level. Institutional discrimination refers to the deliberate or inadvertent normative exclusion within social institutions and occurs when discriminatory acts are permitted by the cultural values,

beliefs, laws, or norms of an institution (Aguirre & Turner, 1995; Hill, 2022; Lott & Maluso, 1995). While institutional-level discrimination often stems from an act at the individual level, discrimination at the institutional level differentiates itself from individual-level discrimination by creating barriers or limiting one's access to necessary or desirable functions in society, such as jobs, housing, or healthcare. Thus, while individual-level and institutional-level discrimination may share characteristics in how they are experienced, they differ in implication (e.g., causing harm at the individual-level versus preventing one from obtaining functions within an institution). Institutional-level discrimination has been found to be associated with lower life satisfaction in both sexual minority adults (Pachankis & Bränström, 2018) and transgender individuals (Bränström & Pachankis, 2021).

The effects of different forms of discrimination have been examined in a racial minority sample. Gee (2008) found that individual-level discrimination had a more significant impact on mental health than institutional-level discrimination in this population. This study provides evidence to support that various forms of discrimination can lead to differential outcomes in other marginalized populations. This study seeks to build on existing literature and explore how various forms of discrimination impact concealment behaviors of individuals in eastern Europe, a population that has historically been understudied.

Understanding Discrimination Within Cultural Context

Because discrimination cannot be considered outside of the broader social context in which it exists, it is imperative to consider culture when examining discrimination. The current study utilizes a sample from Central and Eastern European countries, including Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovenia, which is notable as many individuals who live in these regions exist within a culture of high stigma towards SGM individuals. In fact, the Rainbow Europe Association, which annually publishes a report concentrated on laws and policies related to equality for SGM individuals, revealed that among the 49 countries covered in the report, those examined in the current study ranked between 12th and 32nd in Europe (ILGA Europe, 2023). This not only indicates high levels of stigma for SGM individuals in some areas, but that experiences of stigma and discrimination in Eastern Europe may vary for SGM individuals. The same report stated that, in 2022, there was a substantial rise in both the frequency and severity of violence against SGM individuals across Europe, including countries that participants in the current study resided in. A previous report confirms these assertions, indicating that SGM individuals are consistently among the most stigmatized groups in the region (Human Rights Watch, 2013). More specifically, other studies have found that approximately half of sexual minorities in Slovenia have experienced violence related to their sexual orientation (Kuhar & Švab, 2014, 2019; Švab & Kuhar, 2005). Another study involving 389 SGM individuals from Croatia showed that 75% of participants reported discrimination in the workplace, contributing to difficulties maintaining employment (Butterfield, 2018; Juretić et al., 2017). Research on SGM individuals in Macedonia found that members of the SGM community in this region

experience stigma due to their identity and face institutional discrimination that prevents them from obtaining adequate mental health services (Stojanovski et al., 2021) and are more likely to experience increased levels of anxiety and rumination compared to those who were not within the SGM community (Stojanovski et al., 2017).

Together, these findings suggest that SGM individuals living in Central and Eastern Europe are exposed to high levels of stigma in their environment, which have been shown to be associated with worse mental health outcomes for individuals in this region and abroad.

Identity Concealment

For most individuals, their identity is associated with a sense of self and general wellbeing. In times when an individual does not have the ability to express their identity, they may struggle in other ways (e.g., mental health, self-esteem, or social connectedness; Moradi et al., 2019). Thus, examining experiences of identity concealment, the phenomenon in which an individual conceals aspects of their minoritized identity from others, is crucial. Identity concealment, though, can be difficult to measure, as lack of identity concealment does not necessarily equate to an individual being "out" to everyone in their environment or that they are willing to disclose their identity to others; however, it can mean that the individual is not actively engaging in concealment strategies or strategies at the same level, suggesting more comfort with their minoritized identity (Bry et al., 2017).

Often, concealment strategies are used to keep oneself safe after experiencing discrimination or to avoid stigma or potential discrimination altogether (Bry et al., 2017). While having protective features such as keeping an individual safe from instances of discrimination, engaging in identity concealment can be detrimental to the individual in other ways. For instance, concealment can be mentally taxing, as the individual concealing their identity must constantly self-monitor and be vigilant in situations where the opportunity for identity exposure exists (Pachankis, 2007). Reviews of the literature have found small positive associations between concealment of one's sexual orientation and depression, anxiety, distress, and problematic eating (Hitch & Brown, 2023; Pachankis et al., 2020), which may be partially attributable to lack of support, as the individual who is concealing their identity may not be able to connect with others who could serve as sources of support, which is crucial for positive mental health (Kiekens & Mereish, 2022; Rimmer et al., 2023).

Understanding the development of identity requires consideration of the influence of both individual and cultural contexts. The master narrative framework (McLean & Syed, 2016) emphasizes the importance of exploring identity at both individual and cultural levels, suggesting that an interaction exists between the individual and society in developing one's sense of identity. Therefore, when examining concealment of one's identity, it appears crucial to consider the cultural context in addition to individual-level factors. Previous research has examined how the consequences of identity concealment may vary based on factors such as social context and other identity variables. For instance, sexual orientation concealment has also been shown to mediate the relationship between institutional-level discrimination and overall

satisfaction in countries with high stigma (Bränström & Pachankis, 2021; Pachankis & Bränström, 2018), suggesting that identity concealment can be used as an adaptive coping mechanism to help preserve life satisfaction levels. Research on gender minorities has shown that the effects of identity concealment can also depend on one's identity. For example, non-binary individuals were found to have lower levels of distress when choosing to conceal their identity than when they chose to disclose their identity (Flynn & Smith, 2021). Other research has explored how individuals who identify as transgender may conceal their transgender identity pre-transition to blend/pass to keep them safe in certain social contexts (Rood et al., 2017). However, other gender minorities find it distressing when blending/passing due to the fear of identity erasure (Flynn & Smith, 2021). These findings suggest that other factors, such as one's environment and one's identity variables, may impact the helpfulness of engaging in identity concealment.

Given the potential for both positive and negative effects of identity concealment, it is essential to understand the factors associated with identity concealment. Previous research (Feinstein et al., 2020) revealed that bisexual individuals had two primary motivations for concealing their identity, which include intrapersonal and interpersonal motivators, with identity concealment related to interpersonal motivators (e.g., concern about negative treatment or physical harm) being associated with increased levels of depression and anxiety. This finding suggests that identity concealment may be associated with negative mental health when individuals conceal their identity to protect themselves from others. Coupled with leading theories of minority stress, such as the Minority Stress Model and Psychological Mediation Framework (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Meyer, 2003), this link between fear of discrimination, identity concealment, and mental health is unsurprising as these theories suggest that proximal stressors (e.g., identity concealment) can be the byproduct of distal stress experiences (e.g., discrimination). Because of the negative mental health effects of both discrimination and identity concealment, it seems imperative to examine which types of distal stressors, such as various types of discrimination, are associated with identity concealment to better understand which types of distal stress contribute to higher experiences of proximal stress, and thus, negative mental health.

Purpose of the Current Study

The current study aims to explore the association between discrimination and identity concealment in SGM populations in various countries. The current study seeks to understand the associations between different types of discrimination and identity concealment (i.e., one's choice to engage in identity concealment and the frequency of this behavior). The first aim is to examine if the type of discrimination experienced is associated with whether an individual conceals their identity at all. Specifically, we hypothesized that (1a) experiencing only individual discrimination will be positively associated with identity concealment; (1b) experiencing only institutional discrimination will be positively associated with identity concealment; and (1c)

experiencing both institutionalized and individual discrimination will be positively associated with identity concealment.

The second aim is to explore if different types of discrimination are associated with the frequency to which an individual conceals their SGM identity. Specifically, we hypothesized that (2a) experiencing only individual-level discrimination will be positively associated with identity concealment frequency; (2b) experiencing only institutional-level discrimination will be positively associated with the frequency of one's identity concealment; and (2c) experiencing both individual and institutional-level discrimination will be positively associated with identity concealment frequency.

Methods

Participants

A total of 2296 individuals were included in this study. All participants identified as an SGM individual, reported being at least 18 years old, and resided in one of the following countries in Eastern Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovenia. The study collected responses from participants through an online survey, which provided a safe and confidential environment for participants to share their experiences amidst prevalent stigma in their countries. As the sample was self-selected, it was not a random representation of SGM individuals in the countries included. Given the challenges of obtaining a representative sample, online surveys are considered appropriate for sexual and gender minority populations.

Procedure

Prior to study initiation, the study was reviewed and approved by the University of Michigan-Dearborn's Institutional Review Board. The current study utilized an already existing data set that was collected online from February 2017 until April 2017 by the World Bank Organization (World Bank, 2021), which was a collaborative effort among the World Bank, LGBTI Equal Rights Association for Western Balkans and Turkey, IPSOS Strategic Marketing, the Williams Institute, and 22 civil society organizations (CSOs) across the region. Various online channels, including social media (Facebook, Twitter, national platforms), online banners on major SGM-focused websites, ads on dating apps (e.g., Grindr and PlanetRomeo), mailing lists, and oral communication, were also used to disseminate the survey. Because the survey utilized an online format, only those with internet access were able to take part in the survey. Thus, those without internet access were not included in the study, meaning that the data likely underrepresents SGM individuals who lived in rural areas or smaller towns, those with lower educational attainment, those with higher rates of poverty, and those in older age groups.

At the time of original data collection, questionnaires were translated into local languages using the Independent Polling System of Society's (IPSOS) Strategic Marketing data entry program. Again, it should be noted that analyses for the current study represent a secondary analysis of the original survey which collected data on a variety of experiences and sociopolitical variables with an aim to enhance the understanding of the nature and consequences of excluding and discriminating against SGM individuals. However, only a subset of the information that was collected for the original study was used for the current project based on the research aims. Permission to use the data was obtained prior to accessing the data.

Measures

Individual-Level Discrimination

As part of the original study participants were asked if they had "personally felt discriminated against or harassed" in the last 12 months on a variety of grounds, including their sex, sexual or gender identity, age, religion, disability, country of origin, and level of income. Participants could answer either "yes/no." Anyone who answered that they had been discriminated against or harassed on the basis of sex, gender, sexual orientation, and/or gender expression were coded as having experienced individual-level discrimination related to their SGM identity.

Institutional-Level Discrimination

The study used a question to identify institutional discrimination by asking individuals if they had "experienced discrimination in various situations based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status" in the past year. Participants could answer with "yes/no" if they had experienced this level of discrimination in various contexts including job hunting, at work, when looking for housing, by a healthcare personnel, by social services personnel, by school or university personnel, in a bank or insurance company, and when verifying their identity using an ID card or another official document.

While this question asks about discrimination perceived at the interpersonal level, it appears to tap into the deeper construct of institutional-level discrimination, as discrimination in these areas may restrict or prohibit individuals from accessing numerous resources, including jobs, housing, schooling, and finances. Participants were grouped based on whether they experienced institutional-level discrimination.

Based on the responses to the individual and institutional questions, individuals who had experienced both individual and institutional-level discrimination were combined to create a variable denoting the experience of double discrimination.

Concealment

To measure identity concealment, participants were asked where they "avoid being open about their sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status due to fear of

being assaulted, threatened, or harassed by others," with response options including home; school; workplace; a café, restaurant, or pub; public transport; a sports club; a street, square, car parking lot, or other public place; a park; public premises or buildings, and other.

The study grouped participants into two categories: those who engaged in any concealment and those who did not. Concealment frequency was also analyzed by summing the total number of places where participants endorsed concealment, with higher scores indicating higher levels of identity concealment (and, thus, lower levels of outness). This allowed for concealment to be measured at two levels: whether concealment occurred at all and how frequently it occurred.

Data Analysis

To test hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c, a binary logistic regression was run to examine the associations between individual-level, institutional-level discrimination, and double discrimination with identity concealment. The dichotomous identity concealment variable (0 = no, 1 = yes) was regressed onto a predictor variable with four levels (0 = no discrimination, 1 = individual-level discrimination, 2 = institutional-level discrimination, 3 = double discrimination), with the "no discrimination" group as the reference level. In the second block, we controlled for country using six dummy-coded variables representing each country. For each dummy variable, Albania was the reference group (0) while another country was coded as 1.

To examine associations between the different types of discrimination and frequency of identity concealment, a multivariate linear regression was utilized. In this model, identity concealment was regressed onto each of the discrimination groups: those who experienced only individual-level discrimination, only institutional-level discrimination, and both types of discrimination. Three discrimination variables were created using contrast coding (0 = have not experienced this type of discrimination, 1 = have experienced this type of discrimination). For this analysis, all types of discrimination were entered into the first block, while in the second block, six dummy-coded variables were entered to control for the country in which participants lived.

Results

A total of 2296 SGM individuals participated in the current study, with all participants residing in Eastern Europe (Albania: 8.6%, n = 197; Bosnia and Herzegovina: 16.3%, n = 374; Croatia: 25.5%, n = 580; Kosovo: 5.5%, n = 127; Macedonia: 18.5%, n = 426; Montenegro: 7.6%, n = 175; Slovenia: 18.1%, n = 417). Participants identified as members of the various subgroups that compose the SGM community, including gay (41.9%), lesbian (21.8%), bisexual (35.1%), or straight (1.3%). Majority of participants were assigned male at birth (53%) and aged 18–25 (46.2%, n = 1061), with an average age of 27.6 years. Nearly half had some college or

university education, and 49% were employed at the time of data collection. Most lived in urban areas, 51% were single, and 90% were unmarried.

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics were run for variables of interest. Regarding discrimination, 45.4% ($n=1042$) of participants reported experiencing no discrimination, with 58.1% ($n=605$) of these individuals reporting that they do not conceal their identity at all. A total of 21.7% ($n=498$) of participants reported experiencing only individual discrimination, 7.0% ($n=161$) of participants reported experiencing only institutional discrimination, and 25.9% ($n=595$) of participants reported experiencing double discrimination. 57.7% ($n=1325$) reported concealing their identity in at least one area of their life, and on average, individuals concealed their identity in 3.5 different domains. Frequencies and descriptives were run on the study variables based on participants' country of residence, which can be seen in Table 1.

Tests of Hypothesis 1

As shown in Table 2, results revealed that, when controlling for country, those who experienced individual-level discrimination were 2.8 times more likely to conceal their identity than those who did not experience discrimination (*Odds Ratio (OR)* = 2.81, 95% *Confidence Interval (CI)* [2.24, 3.52]), while those who experienced institutional-level discrimination were 1.5 times more likely to conceal their identity than those who experienced no discrimination (*OR* 1.47, 95% *CI* [1.05, 2.07]). Additionally, results revealed that those who experienced both types of discrimination were 5.4 times more likely to conceal their identity than those who did not experience any type of discrimination (*OR* 5.37, 95% *CI* [4.23, 6.81]).

Tests of Hypothesis 2

In the first step of a multivariate regression, frequency of identity concealment was regressed onto all discrimination types simultaneously. Results (see Table 3) were statistically significant, indicating an association between the frequency of identity concealment and each type of discrimination experienced, with a small effect size, F (3, 2292) = 71.9, $p<0.001$ (Cohen's $f^2=0.09$). Specifically, a significant positive association was found between all types of discrimination and frequency of identity concealment. While the model remained significant and showed a medium effect size when country was controlled for in the second block, F (9, 2286) = 39.18, $p<0.001$ (Cohen's $f^2=0.15$), experiencing only institutional-level discrimination was no longer significantly associated with frequency of identity concealment ($b=0.49$, $SE=0.28$, $\beta=0.04$, $p=0.08$). The strongest association was found between those who experienced both types of discrimination and identity concealment frequency ($b=2.37$, $SE=0.17$, $\beta=0.29$, $p<0.001$), with the association between experiencing only individual-level discrimination and frequency of identity concealment being significant, as well ($b=1.38$, $SE=0.18$, $\beta=0.16$, $p<0.001$).

Table 1 Frequencies and descriptives of study variables

Country	Total participants	Only individual discrimination	Only institutional discrimination	Both types of discrimination	Concealment –Yes or No	Frequency of concealment
	n (%)	*n (%)*	*n (%)*	*n (%)*	*n (%)*	*M (SD)*
Albania	197 (8.6%)	38 (19.3%)	13 (6.6%)	63 (32.0%)	113 (57.4%)	3.03 (3.45)
Bosnia & Herzegovina	374 (16.3%)	86 (23.0%)	30 (8.0%)	117 (31.3%)	259 (69.3%)	4.67 (3.60)
Croatia	580 (25.3%)	118 (20.3%)	46 (7.9%)	109 (18.8%)	340 (58.6%)	3.50 (3.35)
Kosovo	127 (5.5%)	20 (15.7%)	6 (4.7%)	54 (42.5%)	91 (71.7%)	4.89 (3.71)
Macedonia	426 (18.6%)	107 (25.1%)	25 (5.9%)	114 (26.8%)	248 (58.2%)	3.83 (3.79)
Montenegro	175 (7.6%)	33 (18.9%)	16 (9.1%)	41 (23.4%)	89 (50.9%)	3.09 (3.56)
Slovenia	417 (18.2%)	96 (23.0%)	25 (6.0%)	97 (23.3%)	185 (44.4%)	2.14 (2.90)

Table 2 Discrimination predicting one's choice to conceal their minoritized identity

	b	*SE*	*p*	Exp(*B*) [95% *CI*]
Constant	− 0.421	0.16	0.009	
Only individual discrimination	1.03	0.12	< 0.001	2.81 [2.24, 3.52]
Only institutional discrimination	0.40	0.17	0.02	1.48 [1.05, 2.07]
Both types of discrimination	1.68	0.12	< 0.001	5.37 [4.23, 6.81]
Bosnia & Herzegovina	0.54	0.19	0.005	1.71 [1.17, 2.50]
Croatia	0.26	0.18	0.14	1.30 [0.92, 1.85]
Kosovo	0.58	0.26	0.03	1.78 [1.07, 2.95]
Macedonia	0.07	0.19	0.72	1.07 [0.74, 1.54]
Montenegro	− 0.15	0.22	0.50	0.86 [0.56, 1.33]
Slovenia	− 0.48	0.19	0.01	0.62 [0.43, 0.90]

Table 3 Results of regression analyses predicting frequency of identity concealment

Predictor	Identity concealment	
	b (SE)	*t*
Constant	1.97 (0.25)***	7.91
Only individual-level discrimination	1.38 (0.18)***	7.64
Only institutional discrimination	0.49 (0.28)	1.75
Both types of discrimination	2.37 (0.17)***	13.79
Bosnia & Herzegovina	1.60 (0.29)***	5.48
Croatia	0.76 (0.27)**	2.79
Kosovo	1.67 (0.38)***	4.42
Macedonia	0.85 (0.29)**	2.98
Montenegro	0.25 (0.34)	0.73
Slovenia	− 0.73 (0.29)*	− 2.54

*$p \leq 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$

Discussion

The current study examined the associations between various experiences with discrimination and identity concealment behaviors. Using the framework of the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003), we sought to examine the associations between different types of discrimination (i.e., distal stress) and identity concealment (i.e., proximal stress). Furthermore, these associations were examined in a sample of individuals that live within a high-stigma environment to better understand the experiences of those who experience high levels of minority stress. Because both discrimination and the act of concealing one's identity are associated with poorer mental health outcomes, it is important to understand how these constructs are associated with one another to better understand how to improve mental health; however, past studies provide little knowledge about whether different types of discrimination are associated with varying levels of identity

concealment. It was hypothesized that all types of discrimination would be associated with individuals choosing to engage in identity concealment, as well as the frequency of identity concealment.

Overall, findings support the study hypotheses, showing that all types of discrimination were associated with one's choice to engage in identity concealment. In addition, experiencing only individual-level discrimination and experiencing both types of discrimination was associated with the frequency to which an individual conceals their identity. These findings align with previous studies that have found that experiences of discrimination were associated with higher levels of identity concealment (Craig et al., 2023; Pachankis & Bränström, 2018). Surprisingly though, when controlling for country-level differences, experiencing only institutional-level discrimination was not significant in predicting the frequency to which an individual conceals their identity. The absence of a significant association between institutional-level discrimination and identity concealment implies that there may be additional contextual factors at play, such as cultural norms or societal expectations, which could contribute to an individual's decision-making process regarding identity concealment. For instance, many countries in this region lean towards collectivism (Pelham et al., 2022). Thus, individual-level discrimination may pose a greater threat than institutional-level discrimination as it may lead to group rejection, while coping with institutional-level discrimination may be less threatening to one's place in the group, explaining the found association between individual-level discrimination and identity concealment.

Our findings also showed that individuals who experienced both individual and institutional-level discrimination had the highest odds of identity concealment when compared to those who experienced no discrimination. Furthermore, individuals who experienced both types of discrimination also showed the strongest association with the frequency of identity concealment. These results support previous studies which have shown the cumulative effects of minority stress on various outcomes, including hypertension, cancer, substance use, and suicide, (Green et al., 2022; Merieish & Bradford, 2014; Stepanikova et al., 2017), suggesting that higher levels of discrimination were associated with worse outcomes. The current study extends previous findings by providing evidence that those who experience higher levels of discrimination (and, perhaps, various types of discrimination) see the highest odds of identity concealment and experience higher levels of identity concealment. This means that the more discrimination an individual experiences, or rather, as an individual experiences various types of discrimination, one may become more motivated to shield themselves from further discrimination and engage in identity concealment. This is crucial as previous studies have shown that engaging in identity concealment due to concerns of discrimination is associated with worse mental health outcomes (Feinstein et al., 2020).

More broadly, these findings also support an association between distal and proximal stress. Our findings align with the results of past studies that provide evidence for associations between distal and proximal stressors (Cogan et al., 2021; Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Meyer, 2003); however, because the current study is cross-sectional and did not examine the direction of effects between these associations, and because the literature on the temporal relationship between these variables is

mixed (Douglass & Conlin, 2020), more studies are needed to better understand the directionality in the associations between these variables.

Because previous research has shown that identity concealment is associated with poor mental health outcomes (Feinstein et al., 2020; Hitch & Brown, 2023; Pachankis et al., 2020), the current findings stress the importance for interventions aimed at reducing discrimination, promoting inclusivity in one's environment, and teaching SGM individuals adaptive coping skills to utilize following the experiences of discrimination. Furthermore, the findings stress the need for clinicians to understand the oscillating role of identity concealment in the lives of SGM individuals to become aware of how those in this community can use identity concealment in helpful ways, and when the use of identity concealment becomes maladaptive. These results also contribute to the existing literature surrounding the effects of discrimination on individuals from marginalized groups. While previous studies have investigated the separate effects of individual-level and institutional-level discrimination on health in racial minorities (Gee, 2008), our study highlights the importance of considering various types of discrimination together when examining associations between discrimination and health outcomes, as compounded experiences of discrimination may produce poor mental health outcomes. Lastly, our findings suggest that addressing discrimination at multiple levels is critical in reducing the negative consequences of discrimination on individuals from marginalized communities.

Limitations, Strengths, and Future Directions

The current study is not without limitations and, thus, these results should be generalized with caution. First, the current study only examined the cross-sectional association between discrimination and identity concealment, and therefore, temporal associations cannot be concluded from these findings. Future research could utilize longitudinal designs to examine the causal relationship between discrimination and identity concealment over time.

Another limitation is that questions were translated using IPSOS Strategic Marketing's data entry software. While translation made the questions readable to the participant in their native language, the questions were not written specifically for the language itself and there may have been words or phrases that did not translate properly. Thus, the process of translation may have led to an open interpretation of the meanings of words, especially SGM-specific terminology or certain discriminatory processes.

Due to safety and anonymity concerns, questions related to transgender and intersex issues were excluded from the publicly available data and, thus, from the data analysis. While ensuring safety is crucial when conducting such sensitive research, the removal of these items did not allow for examining the specific experiences of transgender and intersex individuals. Further explanation was given by the author of the survey, stating that "we had to exclude [these items] from the data set for privacy concerns." Privacy concerns also restricted the analysis to the group-level, preventing the examination of the associations between discrimination and identity concealment within various subgroups in the SGM community. While the SGM community

shares a common group experience, using aggregate data does not allow for a complete understanding of the nuances in experience within this heterogeneous community. Moreover, privacy constraints extended to other demographic variables, such as race and economic class, limiting our ability to include these as control variables in each model.

The current study also utilized questions that were not validated measures of the constructs assessed, so caution should be taken when interpreting the findings. These questions also asked broadly about the experiences of SGM individuals, which potentially overlooks the nuance within the experiences of the subgroups that compose the SGM community.

Unlike previous studies that utilized advanced methodology involving the standardization of indices and measures of laws, policies, and population attitudes to create structural stigma scores by country (Bränström & Pachankis, 2021), the present study did not adopt such an approach. Future research in this area would benefit from employing similar methodology to confirm and extend the current findings.

The survey utilized in the current study did not include a measure of health (either physical or mental) or well-being variables. While previous research has shown the detrimental effects of identity concealment and discrimination on SGM populations, this study is not able to be integrated into that area of research due to the lack of inclusion of any related variables.

Lastly, because of a lack of SGM literature from Eastern European countries, the current study blended both European and United States literature. Therefore, these findings should continue to be validated in the context of Eastern European literature as it continues to develop.

Despite the limitations, this study has several significant strengths. One strength of the study is that it included over 2000 participants in the sample. Having such a large sample is vital to ensuring that the diverse experiences that exist within the SGM community are captured and represented. Another strength of the current study is that the survey employed within this study contained multiple questions that were utilized to examine a single construct. Multiple questions surrounding the same construct allowed for flexibility in constructing variables while ensuring that the questions were examining the correct construct. This is especially important as previous research has found that the wording of questionnaires can influence how respondents interpret and answer questions, potentially introducing errors or biases into the results; however, using multiple questions can help to mitigate this issue (Holleman, 1999).

These findings underscore the importance of developing interventions to assist SGM individuals following the experiences of discrimination. Various interventions and initiatives have been undertaken and adapted to align with various needs of SGM individuals (Ismail & Lesinko, 2021), however, discrimination and acts of violence against this community continue to rise around the world, including in countries in Eastern Europe (Azis & Azarine, 2023; Mizielinska, 2022). This speaks to the need to focus future work on findings ways to adapt existing interventions to be more effective in creating accepting environments for SGM individuals, as well as developing effective interventions following experiences of minority stress to promote positive mental health in the SGM community.

In conclusion, the current study adds to the literature on the negative effects of discrimination on SGM individuals by highlighting the compounding effect of experiencing multiple forms of discrimination on identity concealment. These findings underscore the importance of addressing discrimination at both individual and institutional levels to reduce the negative impact on the SGM community. Future research would benefit from expanding these findings to explore other factors that influence the decision to conceal one's identity beyond the experience of discrimination, as well as how various subgroups of the SGM community (i.e., gay, lesbian, transgender individuals, etc.) may be similar or different in their concealment behaviors.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no financial or personal conflicts of interest that could inappropriately influence the work presented in this manuscript. The authors have received no financial support for this research and have no relationships with any individuals or organizations that may have influenced the research presented in this manuscript.

Ethical Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Michigan-Dearborn (3/18/2023; HUM00193217).

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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