

Resilience in the Kosovo Context: A Qualitative Study of Young Adults

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Abstract

Most research on resilience has been conducted in North America and Western Europe, limiting our understanding of the processes of overcoming trauma in other cultural settings. This study explored the process of resilience through in-depth interviews with 19 emerging adults in Kosovo, a collectivist and post-conflict society. The study also included an examination of resilience among LGBTQ+ young adults in Kosovo. We used the resilience portfolio model as a framework, which in addition to being one of the few theoretical models previously applied to Kosovo resilience research, is also designed to be adaptable for different cultural contexts. The three domains of the resilience portfolio model, meaning making, regulatory, and interpersonal strengths, manifested in numerous ways in this sample. Participants described relying on some psychosocial strengths that are commonly identified in resilience research in other settings, such as social support and future orientation, as well as some factors, such as dignity, that have been less studied and may reflect more unique aspects of Kosovar culture. LGBTQ+ participants mentioned peer support as important, especially as many received limited support from family members. The process of coming out and activism were also highlighted as key strengths for LGBTQ+ participants. The results highlight the need to consider cultural settings in resilience research. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of supporting LGBTQ+ communities in Kosovo by recognizing their challenges, traumas, and capabilities.

Keywords

resilience, adversities, interpersonal strengths, regulation, meaning making, collectivist societies, post-conflict societies

Research on resilience has increased significantly in recent years, with numerous studies focusing on the high levels of stress and trauma that many individuals experience during their lifetimes, and what factors help people overcome these adversities (e.g., Grych et al., 2015; Hamby et al., 2018; Ho et al., 2019). However, this research has been largely centered in North America and Western Europe, with few studies conducted in Kosovo or other countries of Southeastern Europe. Further, among the limited resilience research that has been conducted in Southeastern Europe, few studies have focused on the period of emerging adulthood, with most focusing either on children or later stages of adulthood (Arnett, 2006; Arnett et al., 2014). Even less attention has been paid to resilience among members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) community (by this term we mean to be inclusive of other sexual orientations and gender identities as well), with only one previous resilience study (that we could identify) focused on the LGBTQ+ community in Kosovo (Rahmani, 2019). The purpose of this study is to explore the strengths of Kosovar emerging adults, including those who identify as LGBTQ+, using the resilience portfolio model (Grych et al., 2015) as a theoretical framework.

The Resilience Portfolio Model

This study relies on the resilience portfolio model as a theoretical framework. This model integrates studies conducted in the fields of positive psychology, post-traumatic growth, and coping. The resilience portfolio model is one of the few theoretical models of resilience that has been applied in Kosovo (Kelmendi & Hamby, 2023) and is also well-suited to exploring cultural differences in resilience processes. Although resilience has sometimes been treated as a personality trait that is roughly equivalent to emotional toughness or “grit,” most contemporary resilience theorists focus on resilience as a process that includes harnessing assets and resources across the whole social ecology to overcome trauma

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(e.g., Grych et al., 2015; Ungar, 2008). Resilient individuals demonstrate their ability to adapt and thrive in new situations by employing various skills and resources at their disposal. This dynamic nature of resilience underscores the significance of understanding it as a process rather than a fixed trait, as it relies on the interplay between risk and protective factors that shape an individual's life at any given time. One advantage of the resilience portfolio model is that it formally incorporates aspects of the social ecology into its conception of resources needed to overcome trauma, making it particularly well-suited for use in collectivist cultures like Kosovo. Specifically, resilience stems from a combination of psychosocial strengths in three domains: regulatory (managing emotions and behaviors), meaning-making (connecting to something larger than oneself), and interpersonal (relational assets and resources). Existing evidence suggests that psychosocial strengths that are valued in the collectivist and post-conflict societies of Southeastern Europe include honor, dignity, family solidarity, and nationwide meaning making (Arënlju et al., 2019; Kelmendi et al., 2020, 2021; Kelmendi & Hamby, 2023; Rrahmani, 2019).

Resilience in Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood has been considered crucial in the development and understanding of resilience due to the significant changes in abilities, strengths, educational achievement, and social roles during this stage, which greatly impact life course milestones and outcomes (Masten et al., 2006). Understanding resilience at this stage helps foster a better understanding of individuals' long-term outcomes and trajectories, highlighting the potential for growth and positive development even in the face of significant challenges. Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood is the most prominent conceptual model and includes a focus on five developmental phases, accompanied by important milestones such as exploration, instability, self-focus, independence, feeling in-between, and possibilities/optimism (Arnett, 2006). Resilience processes during these developmental phases could help emerging adults navigate developmental challenges and achieve these milestones by harnessing assets and resources to develop coping strategies, adapt, and forge a new understanding of self and identity. Prior research shows that adolescents and young adults with higher intellectual resources, optimistic future orientation, and supportive relationships show higher resilience (Burt & Paysnick, 2012; Masten et al., 2006; Wood et al., 2018). However, most studies on resilience among emerging adults (e.g., Madewell & Garcia, 2016; Masten et al., 2006) are from so-called "WEIRD" countries (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010). There is a need for more studies from countries outside North America and Western Europe, especially, because they can provide a more nuanced understanding of resilience in other socio-cultural contexts and contribute to diversity in science (Arnett, 2007; Wood et al., 2018).

The Kosovo Context

Kosovo is a post-conflict country in Southeastern Europe, bordered by Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Albanians are the largest ethnic group (93%), followed by Serbs, Bosniaks, Gorani, Turkish, Roma Ashkali, and Egyptians (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2015). During 1998–1999, Kosovo experienced a war with Serbia, which resulted in high doses of trauma, loss of family members, separations from family and community, and widespread economic hardship (Weine et al., 2005). The bombing campaign in and around Prishtina, the capital, damaged many buildings, many of which have not yet been rebuilt. At least 10,000 Kosovar people were killed. Consequently, the Kosovo population and other post-conflict Southeastern European countries show symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression (Kelmendi & Hamby, 2023; Turner et al., 2003). Prevalence rates for PTSD are especially high among refugees and veterans, and higher than rates in other post-conflict countries such as Vietnam and Algeria (Fanaj & Melonashi, 2017).

Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe (55% of the population is under 30), which is potentially a great advantage and strong developmental force. Nonetheless, many Kosovo youth experience significant challenges and have negative future outlooks (UNDP, 2019). Youth face a lack of job opportunities (29% unemployed, with higher rates among women and other marginalized groups), poor economic conditions, nepotism, and corruption. Stress and other mental health issues were already common and worsened after the pandemic (Hyseni & Hoxha, 2020). Several opinion polls show that many Kosovo youth are considering emigration, potentially leading to a loss of human capital that could contribute to a vicious cycle for the broader Kosovo society (Kelmendi, 2023). Regarding socio-cultural dynamics, Kosovo is still considered a collectivist society (Kadriu, 2023), where values related to tradition and patriarchy remain prominent (Kelmendi, 2015). On the other hand, youth and emerging adults are influenced by global trends, which help them develop their identity and individuality in ways that are different from previous generations. In this context, with minimal opportunities at the macro level (governmental, legislation, healthcare systems), and a lack of knowledge and skills at the mezzo level (community, schools, local groups), it is crucially important to understand how to support resilience among emerging adults in post-conflict contexts (Burt & Paysnick, 2012).

Resilience Research in Kosovo and Related Collectivist and Post-Conflict Societies

Overall Patterns in Kosovo Resilience Research

A scoping review by Kelmendi and Hamby (2023) found that some of the main values that support resilience in Kosovo and nearby populations, based on research conducted before 2021,

are honor, dignity, respect, good behavior, hospitality, and nationwide meaning-making. Family, society, and community support have also played major roles in building resilience in war-torn Southeastern European countries (Gasparre et al., 2010; Weine, 2008). This is similar to findings in other countries, where lower distress after trauma was present among youth who had strengths related to coping, parental support, self-esteem, and optimism (e.g., Moisan et al., 2019). However, most previous resilience studies in Kosovo used a quantitative design (e.g., Agani et al., 2010; Huçaj & Rexhepi et al., 2022), leaving open the possibility that some strengths or culturally specific nuances in their expression have not been captured in existing data. Prior qualitative studies in Kosovo found strong ties between resilience and psychological endurance, controlled coping, and solidarity (Arënlju & Landsman, 2010; Weine, 2008).

The LGBTQ+ Community in Kosovo

A few studies have been conducted on psychosocial strengths among members of the LGBTQ+ community in Kosovo. Brahamani (2019) found that lesbian emerging adults reported higher resilience, especially in dimensions of optimism, emotion regulation, and social support, compared to other LGBTQ+ groups. In general, LGBTQ+ people in Kosovo face difficulties and lack of protection from mezzo-level factors such as legal frameworks, social stigma, and cultural influences, as well as macro-level systems including societal attitudes and religious norms. Kosovo's parliament rejected the law on same-sex civil unions which was followed by several comments from lawmakers who stated that same-sex civil partnerships represent depravity and moral degeneration (Euroneews, 2022). Moreover, LGBTQ+ community groups in Kosovo face higher levels of social stigma which are related to an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and stress (Llulaku et al., 2023). The relative lack of research with the LGBTQ+ community in Kosovo can be primarily attributed to stigma, discrimination, and lack of rights (Nuhju, 2023). Societal attitudes, like homophobia, present significant challenges for researchers exploring the LGBTQ+ community in Kosovo, contributing to the insufficient representation of LGBTQ+ perspectives in academic discourse. This underscores the urgent necessity for societal acceptance and adapted research approaches to address these limitations effectively.

The Current Study

Qualitative methods have been suggested to improve understanding of how aspects of resilience manifest in different contexts (Kelmendi & Hamby, 2023). This qualitative study adopts an exploratory approach to investigate resilience in the post-conflict society of Kosovo. The following research question guided this project: What psychosocial strengths (with a particular focus on regulatory, interpersonal, and

meaning-making strengths) contribute to resilience among emerging adults in post-conflict Kosovo?

This study adds to recent studies on the resilience portfolio model that have been conducted outside the U.S. (Gonzalez-Mendez et al., 2021; Moisan et al., 2019). Studying resilience in the Kosovo population can contribute to identifying recovery factors and rebuilding processes as well as inform interventions for post-conflict development. Furthermore, this study explores resilience processes in vulnerable groups, including LGBTQ+ adults living in Kosovo.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling, resulting in 19 interviews conducted by the first and third authors. The sampling process began with informing acquaintances of the authors that we were searching for young adults willing to participate in a study on significant experiences in their lives. Interested young adults were then provided informed consent. At the end of each interview, we requested a referral for other participants. Although most participants were recruited from the University of Prishtina, efforts were made to include people from other cities and universities. The inclusion criteria to participate were to be 20–30 years old and able to conduct the interview in Albanian or English. All participants were Albanian, of which twelve were women, six were men, and one identified as nonbinary. Ages ranged from 21–30, with an average of 24.9 years ($SD = 3.46$). A particular effort was made to include people who identify as LGBTQ+ to learn more about resilience processes in that community. The sample of 19 included two gay men, three lesbian women, one queer woman, one transgender man, and one nonbinary queer person (42.1% of the sample identifying as LGBTQ+). Other participants identified as heterosexual and cisgender.

Procedure

Interviewees were given the option to conduct the interview online, on the University of Prishtina campus, at the first author's home, or at the premises of a non-governmental organization (NGO) to offer a range of culturally congruent options. For research purposes, the first interviewer prepared a room where the privacy of the interviewees was respected. Nine interviews were conducted at the researcher's home, eight were conducted online, and two were conducted at the NGO. All interviews were conducted in Albanian, but there were certain phrases that interviewees felt more comfortable expressing in English. All procedures were approved by the ethical review board of the host institution. The average duration of the interviews was 42 minutes ($SD = 22.4$) with a range of duration of 17–100 minutes. Interviews were conducted during April–September 2022.

Interviews were semi-structured. The interview guide was designed to elicit different psychosocial strengths that participants used to overcome trauma and adversity. Interview questions were adapted from prior resilience portfolio research (Hamby et al., 2018, 2022) and included general questions about significant episodes in their lives and questions about resilience portfolio dimensions, such as: (1) “Can you tell me about a high point in your life, a significant event that impacted your life for the better? What happened, where and when did it take place, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling?”; (2) “Let’s talk about finding meaning in your life. You might find meaning through spirituality, but you may also find meaning through your role in your family or community, or your commitment to a cause, goal, group, or person. Tell me a story about a time you got to do something that gave you a sense of meaning or purpose.” For the full interview, see [Appendix A](#).

The interview questions were first written in English and then translated into Albanian. To enhance the translation’s precision, the back translation technique was used, which facilitated a thorough review and refinement of the questions. The resilience portfolio model was chosen because of its relevance to the study’s purpose of exploring resilience among emerging adults in a post-conflict society. However, given the exploratory nature of the study, the data analysis process remained open to identifying and examining patterns that may arise beyond the resilience portfolio model. This approach allowed for the exploration of additional themes and insights that could contribute to an understanding of resilience among emerging adults in the Kosovo context.

All interviews were done by the first and third author. The interviewers, being of a similar age to the majority of participants, created a comfortable and informal atmosphere, enabling participants to view the interviews as casual discussions. Participants were aware that the authors were psychology graduate students at the time of the interviews. Given the sensitive nature of the topics, this approach was deemed essential to foster an environment where participants felt at ease and were more willing to open up about their experiences. All participants were first informed about the purpose of the interview, their rights to confidentiality, and the type of questions. All participants were asked for permission to record audio of the interview. To minimize harm, we informed interviewees that we were available to discuss any feelings that could have been triggered during the interview process. We also provided a list of references for reaching out for psychological support.

Statement of Reflexivity

EH is from Kosovo and has a master’s degree in School Psychology and Counseling from the University of Prishtina. Her parents are both veterans of the Kosovo War and completed higher education after the age of 40. As a psychology major, and raised in an average-income family, she developed

an interest in strengths-based approaches to understanding how people from marginalized communities deal with trauma. EH is also an activist for LGBTQ+ rights in Kosovo. KK is from Kosovo and is an associate professor at the University of Prishtina. Since her experiences as a war refugee, KK has a strong interest in issues related to violence and survivors of violence. She is interested in resilience in the Kosovo context and completed a Fulbright Scholarship in resilience in 2021. SR is from Kosovo and has a bachelor’s degree in Psychology. In his volunteer experience with LGBTQ+, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, he developed an interest in resilience in disadvantaged social groups. He has participated in numerous human rights advocacy initiatives. SH is from the US and a developer of the resilience portfolio model. A guiding principle of her work is that there are many underappreciated strengths in understudied and marginalized communities, a perspective influenced by her time living in the rural southern U.S. (where her research center is based) and other lower-income and marginalized communities. She first became involved in research in Kosovo through hosting the Fulbright that KK received and visited Kosovo twice in 2022.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was applied to analyze the data. This method involves finding patterns and themes in the transcripts by identifying divergences or outliers (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The coding process included multiple rounds of coding such as open coding, axial coding, and selective approaches in order to achieve consensus on key themes in the transcripts. During open coding, the first three authors worked together to extract themes by reading the transcripts multiple times and focusing on mentions related to coping and overcoming adversity. In the second phase, the themes were organized into more general categories, e.g., “dealing with prior trauma”, “future orientation as a coping strategy”, “family support as both burden and strength”. The categories were refined in the axial phase with the involvement of all four authors, who also identified counterexamples and integrated the major themes in the selective phase through consensus.

The investigator triangulation method was used to ensure trustworthiness and credibility, where all researchers were involved in the coding, analysis, and interpretation. Following common practice, member checks were used with a subset of participants to better understand their impressions of the subject matter (Rew et al., 2008; Varpio et al., 2017). According to Harvey (2015), researchers can analyze individual participant’s data, and emerging findings might be refined during member check interviews. Member checks were done via descriptions of preliminary findings with four interviewees. The first author shared the main categories and themes and discussed the interpretation of the findings. Participants agreed with the interpretations and provided additional insight with minor comments on themes. For instance, in one case, when an individual described their experience

with emotional distancing, our initial interpretation categorized it as a lack of emotion regulation in maintaining relationships. However, upon further discussion with the same individual, it became evident that this distancing was tied to a sense of dignity. The person explained that they were using emotional distance to overcompensate for past harms, revealing a deeper, more complex motivation behind their behavior. Finally, the reflexivity statement was included to get a better understanding of researchers' preconceptions and values and how these affect research decisions in all phases of qualitative studies. Reflexivity plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of topics and the questions we pose, making it a fundamental aspect of knowledge building (Lazard & McAvoy, 2017).

A deductive approach was used with the resilience portfolio model as a guiding framework for analyzing the data, which allowed for a more structured examination. However, given the possibility of uncovering new patterns or constructs, an inductive approach was also incorporated during the analysis process. By combining these approaches, the analysis ensured a focused exploration of the model and an openness to insights that emerged from the data. This mixed approach is known as inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach is highly beneficial for researchers investigating complex, multi-layered problems. It allows for an open and inductive method of generating themes while simultaneously providing the advantage of applying themes deductively from an existing framework, thus ensuring theoretical rigor (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Hitchcock & Onwuegbuzie, 2020).

For inter-coder reliability, we adhered to the qualitative methodology outlined by Cofie et al. (2022) that is designed to ensure a truly qualitative process end-to-end (vs. importing standards designed for positivist research). This involved following the steps outlined by Cofie and colleagues. Initial data coding was undertaken by the first three authors, including one (KK) with prior experience coding qualitative data. During this process, coders focused on the shared meaning of codes through dialogue and consensus in an iterative process to refine themes until code saturation was reached. The author with the most expertise in qualitative research (SH) was more removed from data collection (a step they recommend to minimize bias) and was later consulted to resolve outstanding conflicts and help further refine themes. Additionally, as also recommended by Cofie et al. (2022), all four authors utilized a consistent theoretical framework, the resilience portfolio model, as the basis for their coding scheme.

Results

Our study of the narratives shared by participants uncovered various manifestations of elements that contribute to resilience in the cultural context of our Kosovar participants, who grew up in and were (at the time of the study) living in a post-conflict society

that is still recovering from the 1998–1999 war. While answering interview questions, some participants shared additional traumatic events in their lives, including death of a parent, separation from family, father absence, living in poverty, uncomfortable interpersonal relationships, accidents, health issues, and bullying. In total, 12 out of 19 participants shared additional adverse experiences (beyond living in a post-conflict society) as well as ongoing challenges. LGBTQ+ participants discussed the challenges of coming out and living in a homophobic context. The themes that emerged from the data analysis were categorized into the three dimensions of the resilience portfolio model and include elements of meaning making (sense of purpose and future orientation), regulation (emotion regulation, cognitive coping skills, and dignity) and interpersonal resources (peer and family support) (Table 1).

Meaning Making

Sense of Purpose and Future Orientation. Meaning making includes the capacity to create purpose or connect to something larger than oneself, even during or after traumatic life events. In this young adult sample, important factors in meaning making included assets related to participants' development, including developing careers or other aspects of their identities. One participant stated that:

Throughout my life, my primary aim has consistently been to make a meaningful impact on the world or on individuals. To achieve this, I ventured into various career paths. Creating music, for instance, proved to be empowering and inspiring for me. As a producer, witnessing artists make songs inspired by my music fueled my motivation. The profound influence my music had, served as a driving force in my career. (Participant 11: 24-year-old man)

Future orientation, in terms of focusing on achievement, a desire for a better life, working on self-improvement, and hope for the future, was also a prominent theme in this group of young adults. Nonetheless, one can also see the impact of prior traumatic experiences. For example, one participant said: *"I was hopeful. I've convinced myself that whatever happens in the future is no worse than the things that happened in the past."* (Participant 4: 25-year-old woman). Speaking about academic successes, one participant used positive self-talk and future orientation to address challenges. As they stated, although they still acknowledge experiencing social isolation, they indicate that they are doing better than previously:

I had many challenges that I overcame and told myself that I can do it; it doesn't matter if I don't have any colleagues or friends. It doesn't matter if you're in university by yourself, like you were in high school. The day will come again when I am well. Fortunately, that day has come... My Master's shaped me as well as my values, goals and I'm grateful for it because now I started thinking more about my future. (Participant 8: 25-year-old woman)

Table 1. Main Themes and Sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Supporting Quotes
Meaning-making domain	Sense of purpose and future orientation	"I was hopeful. I've convinced myself that whatever happens in the future is no worse than the things that happened in the past"
	The development of meaning and posttraumatic growth	"Yes, something I learned is that the more challenges you faced, the more you learned..."
Regulatory domain	Emotion regulation	"When I have worrying situations, I distract myself. Watch movies, go somewhere, take a trip, go out with a friend..."
	Coping skills and adaptability	"I had to adapt rapidly. I wasn't ready [to leave my family]. But with time I adapted and found my place away from family and friends..."
	Dignity	"I haven't talked to the friend I mentioned for 3 years now...while we were friends, she passed every boundary I had, she made me feel so bad and I had to cut her off..."
Interpersonal domain	Peer support	"To my fortune, all my friends were good people and accepted me as I am ...they didn't think it [sexual orientation] was anything weird, they took it as something very normal"
	Family support	"He [the dad] was the one that was always supportive of me and made me think that I can achieve whatever I want. This has helped me become a fighter and not give up on my goals"
	Coming out as interpersonal strength for LGBTQ+participants	"Even though it was difficult [coming out], from the moment I did it, that pushed me to find myself by creating a relationship with my family. From that moment, I didn't need to hide anymore...I felt much more relieved."

Participants identifying with the LGBTQ+ community pointed out the meaning they develop through work for LGBTQ+ rights. One participant stated:

From the moment that I had my first interview, where I talked about the movie I made, love-themed, I received a message on Instagram from someone that said "I saw your interview today, I was having suicidal thoughts, but I saw you and I didn't feel alone anymore", from then I understood the power my job has. That was my goal from when I began this project, but when I saw what impact this had on other people, I understood that I was achieving my goal. (Participant 16: 30-year-old nonbinary person)

Other LGBTQ+ participants reflected on the importance of public activism and the meaning they find in organizing events that promote the rights of this community:

Usually what gives me meaning, it's the street actions or protests we organize for different topics. Each time we do them, I have these feelings that we're doing something good, for example during Pride Week, all these give me a feeling like I'm doing something for a better future, that has a form of meaning that I'm part of this change. (Participant 18: 26-year-old woman)

The Development of Meaning and Posttraumatic Growth. Difficult events also influenced how participants viewed and appreciated others in their life, which has elements of the shifting in priorities or gaining new insights that are common in posttraumatic growth. For example, interviewees who experienced the death of a family member stated that after the death they valued time with others more and did more for loved ones. One participant expressed it like this:

When my mother died, I regretted that I didn't help her earlier [during her illness], even though she never let me. She died on her feet [without asking for help for anything] without even asking for a glass of water. This helped me to take more care of my brother and my father [after the mother's death]. (Participant 7: 25-year-old woman)

After their father's illness, a participant shared: *"I saw that I need to value people more and spend more time with them, we don't know when their last day can be. Within a few minutes, something can happen to us that will completely change our lives."* (Participant 2: 27-year-old woman). Other participants learned to appreciate the lessons that can be gleaned from challenges:

Yes, something I learned is that the more challenges you faced, the more you learned, and because of this, I wanted to go to the places I went with my mom [while she was alive], because I want to face that sadness. (Participant 7: 25-year-old woman)

Regulatory Strengths

Regulatory strengths help people manage emotions and behavioral impulses. Participants shared their ways of managing emotions of sadness and anger and the management of stressful situations or adverse events.

Emotion Regulation. Emotion regulation often refers to handling difficult negative emotions. Some participants reported that they manage negative emotions without the help of others; for example, *"When I have worrying situations, I distract myself. Watch movies, go somewhere, take a trip, go out with a*

friend. It's not always the right decision, but I come back fresh to solve my problem." (Participant 11: 24-year-old man). Another participant shared:

Lately, I've been learning to handle my emotions better. I've noticed an improvement in staying calm and growing emotionally. I've also started finding significance in moments of sadness, recognizing that they allow me to focus on self-care or pay closer attention to my well-being. (Participant 13: 26-year-old man)

Coping Skills and Adaptability. Another aspect of regulation reported by participants was cognitive restructuring. This was usually more present in participants who showed more self-awareness and were able to rationalize emotions and events by understanding their source and then re-shaping their response. Emotion awareness was also an element of this process, which helped point to ways of managing emotions that included recognition and acceptance of emotions. For example, one participant said:

Now that I'm normalizing these feelings, compassion, stress, it's fine and normal and I get through it easier. I take a deep breath and tell myself it's normal that you're nervous that this and that has happened...I see things strategically, I categorize problems. (Participant 5: 23-year-old woman)

Another participant reported on the awareness they gained from therapy sessions:

Therapy helped me a lot because there I realized that it is not my fault that everything has happened in my life and I do not owe anything to anyone, nor to my parents even though they spend a lot of time on [caring for] me. (Participant 13: 26-year-old man)

Adaptability, which means being able to respond with different coping strategies depending on circumstances, has also been considered a regulatory factor. For participants in this Kosovar context, adaptation was a reaction to challenges. Adaptation was sometimes linked to meaning-making components, with participants using adaptation as a coping response also making plans accompanied by their hope for a better future. For example:

There were many turning points in my life. Events have happened many times that have changed the course of my life and I have never gone back. I think that it was the ability to adapt [that helped me the most]. (Participant 10: 25-year-old woman)

Two participants from the LGBTQ+ community pointed out the importance of drag performing in their regulation processes. They stated that: *"When I become [drag queen name], I'm another person. Since I started doing it, in 2017, I noticed it. Therefore, anytime I have worries or any heavy mental load, I do drag, and that helps me get over it."* (Participant 16: 30-year-old nonbinary person)

The other participant pointed out:

For me, performing drag for the first time, it was like an escape, I felt more confident than ever. I remembered that I wasn't shy or self-conscious like I usually am. I felt like another person, and usually after that first performance, I thought that if I can't do something, my drag persona can do it. That was inspiring to me. (Participant 19: 23-year-old gay man)

Dignity. Dignity in the Kosovar context involves maintaining personal values, self-respect, and assertiveness, and thus can also be seen as a regulatory strength. A question on dignity was included in the interview because it was found to be an important factor in [Kelmendi and Hamby's \(2023\)](#) review of prior resilience research in Kosovo. In this sample, dignity was related to maintaining social boundaries. However, in contrast to resources in the interpersonal domain, the focus was on navigating interpersonal challenges. Stories about dignity shared by participants had to do with other people, specifically events in which personal values were violated by others. Self-respect and assertiveness were important strengths of the interviewees, as some participants expressed:

For me, dignity matters most, and it's crucial to defend the values I believe in. I often find it tough because I let people take advantage of me, maybe because of how I was brought up. This has been holding me back, but I only noticed it when I started working. I realized that if I keep letting others push me around and cross my limits, I won't be able to progress and grow. But I'm not sure what to do about it. (Participant 13: 26-year-old man)

On the other hand, for others, maintaining appropriate boundaries has been a challenge. Although the young woman below reported some progress in navigating relationships, she also described some emotional distancing that may be over-compensating for past harms.

When I realized that they [friends] were treating me badly, I still hung out with them. I like it that now I have people that I love very much and can spend time with. At the same time, I think I have a coping mechanism that I wouldn't care about if they left me. I like that I have them, but I don't know if we will be friends forever. (Participant 5: 23-year-old woman)

Interpersonal Strengths

Interpersonal resources are important protective factors for many individuals. In this sample, there were differences in the level of support or presence of friends and family in experiencing significant events with negative and positive impact. In addition to reporting the level of support from others, participants also talked about developing and maintaining relationships with others and explored these processes throughout the interviews. During the interviews, elements of gratitude, acknowledgement, compassion, and forgiveness

were related to finding strength after experiencing negative events. The interpersonal domain also includes an individual's social skills or other assets that can be used to access external interpersonal resources. In this sample, going through the process of coming out in the LGBTQ+ community was the best example of an interpersonal asset.

Peer Support. The interviewees described the importance of support from friends after challenging events in their lives. One of the women emphasized: *"I have many social groups, for me it is very important that I also have a large family group. We share everything as a group."* (Participant 1: 22-year-old woman). Moreover, participants reported that friends inspired and motivated them, and said that the sense of belonging to society is very important for them. This is also related to the sense of collectivism that is present in the Kosovar context.

It is very important to have friends. I don't know what I would have done if I had only socialization within the family, but my friends accepted me and helped me a lot. At least you can pick your friends and if something goes wrong you can leave, but it's harder to leave your family. Thankfully I have a very good relationship with my friends. (Participant 10: 25-year-old woman)

Participants also spoke about the importance of social support in their lives. One of the participants explains as follows:

For many years [friends have inspired me], especially to express my creativity and deal with art and creativity. They are a very supportive factor and continue to be. And also in the academic aspect, they push me forward and give me support and help when I need it. (Participant 15: 24-year-old woman)

For some, friends were a more important source of social support than family. One interviewee said that *"I don't share my emotions with my family, it's different, they don't really understand how I feel, so I talk to my friends."* (Participant 1: 22-year-old woman). In a pattern reflecting post-traumatic growth, one participant shared how experiencing the loss of his grandmother led to him prioritizing relationships more:

When she [grandmother] died, it was like a sign that I should get used to being with others. Others also told me that I should have a bigger circle, not just one person. Then, I started hanging out with others more—I've been with my family for a while. (Participant 12: 23-year-old man)

Similarly, participants from the LGBTQ+ community emphasized the importance of friends' support, which helped them accept themselves.

To my fortune, all my friends were good people and accepted me as I am...they didn't think it [sexual orientation] was anything

weird, they took it as something very normal. This helped me a lot in accepting myself and not thinking I was different from others. (Participant 13: 26-year-old man).

Moreover, among participants from the LGBTQ+ community, it was emphasized that the support they have received from friends was a major factor promoting thriving when they were exploring their gender orientation or identity.

The people that I got close to, are the reason that I felt comfortable with everything, the way I dress, the first time I cut my hair and started learning new terms, getting educated about who I am. And for the first time I said out loud "I like her" and for the first time I heard someone say "nice", they didn't judge, they didn't look at me weirdly, I just heard a "nice". And it was shocking to me because I wasn't used to positive reactions. (Participant 17: 25-year-old woman).

Family Support. Some participants expressed that they faced their biggest challenges in their lives with the help of family:

I had my family's support during all the time I was sick, but my dad's support was the greatest. He was the one that was always supportive of me and made me think that I can achieve whatever I want. This has helped me become a fighter and not give up on my goals. (Participant 6: 26-year old woman)

However, some participants indicated that they do not feel connected to their families. Family members could be a source of adversity rather than a source of support. Navigating family and peer support during the transition to adulthood could also be challenging. In the following quote, the young man alludes to feeling strongly connected to his family, a common experience in this collectivist society, but still does not find support there:

I am very connected to my family, and I am waiting for their acceptance, but it has been a long time since I told myself that it is not their intention to support me, so I have to rely on myself and my strengths. (Participant 13: 26-year-old man)

One interviewee who reported that she doesn't like to spend time with her family said:

I always get out of the room when they mention it [grandfather's death]...I can't handle it. When they get together, there are always a lot of family members, but I hate that, I always ignore these gatherings and prefer to be alone. (Participant 4: 25-year-old woman)

Some LGBTQ+ participants pointed out the importance of family support after coming out. For example one participant said:

I didn't want to lose my family, there is no one closer than family, but we have arrived at that point, we found a middle ground. This

was something that changed everything for me, I could do anything I wanted without sacrificing my identity and knew that I had my family behind me. (Participant 16: 30-year-old nonbinary person)

Another participant talked about what they felt when their mother expressed a form of support towards her daughter's sexual orientation in front of other family members:

It was very important for me that the main person in my family was on my side and I felt safe. I didn't know I could experience that feeling from my family. It was shocking, I wasn't expecting it. I couldn't have felt better. (Participant 17: 25-year-old woman)

On the other hand, lack of family support was also common among the participants from the LGBTQ+ community. A gay man points out that:

In my family, everyone is considered as an open-minded person, and because of this I thought it would be easier for them to accept me, but in fact they are not like that. I know that I, as the eldest child, break the rules or do things that they expect their child not to do... I have wanted for a long time not to feel guilty for anything, because if they love me, they wouldn't make me feel guilty for being who I am. (Participant 13: 26-year-old man)

Challenges with homophobia in the family were also dealt with using their portfolios of psychosocial strengths, such as meaning making. A lesbian participant said:

Unfortunately, I dealt with a lot of homophobia in the family...I gave meaning to this by saying, it's okay. I'm more interesting this way and I'm breaking years and years of patterns in my family and in the future, I will be a supportive point for the future youth in my family which can also be part of the community and fortunately they will have an adult family member [myself] where they can find support and understanding. (Participant 15: 24-year-old woman)

Coming Out as an Interpersonal Strength for LGBTQ+ Participants. One of the most important events for LGBTQ+ participants was the process of coming out to family, close friends, and society in general. This process and also the reaction they received from others differs in participants' experiences, for example:

When I was 18 years old, I came out for the first time to my friends. I had just finished high school, and it was very important for me to show how I had been feeling. It was difficult but the day that I did it, I felt 100 times more relieved. (Participant 19: 23-year-old man)

Participants pointed out the aftermath of coming out, especially in the family context:

Even though it was difficult [coming out], from the moment I did it, that pushed me to find myself by creating a relationship with my family. From that moment, I didn't need to hide anymore...I felt much more relieved. At the moment I told my family, even though the process lasted for 10 years, I'm at a point where I'm completely myself, I don't need to hide myself from other people. (Participant 16: 30-year-old nonbinary person)

Coming out, an inherently interpersonal process involving disclosure to others, also had meaning making elements for some, as a key part of the development of their gender and sexual identity:

When I came out and started university, I changed 100% as a person. I started being more interested in the things around me, learning new things and creating a new identity. I started accepting my femininity, being myself in mannerisms, talking, etc., and not forcing myself to talk differently. I started loving myself more, giving myself more worth, respecting myself more. (Participant 19: 23-year-old man)

Discussion

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first qualitative study guided by the resilience portfolio model (Grych et al., 2015; Hamby et al., 2018) in the Kosovar context (or the south-eastern region of Europe). As far as we are aware, this is also the first resilience portfolio study in a post-conflict society and the first with a specific focus on the experiences of people who identify as LGBTQ+. In this sample of young/emerging adults, including several who identified as LGBTQ+, we explored their resilience processes and psychosocial strengths and how these mapped onto the dimensions of the resilience portfolio model. One of the essential themes related to emerging adulthood is the question: What do I want to do? This is related to the identity exploration phase, in which, through exploring their environment, emerging adults develop meaning for themselves and a sense of agency (Schwartz et al., 2005).

Our study reveals that for emerging adults in the Kosovo context, meaning-making concepts center around a sense of purpose, future orientation, and personal growth. Their sense of purpose intertwines with identity exploration, shaping their self-understanding, values, beliefs, and relationships. Additionally, their future orientation, crucial for personal and professional growth, remains uncertain amidst transitions in work, love, and social dimensions. These themes echo cross-cultural findings in countries like Italy, Japan (Crocetti et al., 2015), Switzerland (Baggio et al., 2015), and the Czech Republic (Macek et al., 2007), as well as Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood.

Particularly crucial amid economic challenges and limited job prospects, a sense of purpose emerged as a pivotal factor fostering resilience and cognitive development, shielding individuals from the detrimental effects of stress (Lewis &

Hill, 2021; Ryff et al., 2012; Windsor et al., 2015). Having a clear sense of purpose and a well-defined identity motivates individuals to engage in more meaningful work, consistent with prior research on emerging adults stressing the importance of finding significance in both love and work during this life stage (Domene et al., 2015; Mayseless Keren, 2014). The focus on future orientation observed among our participants, emphasizing personal and professional development, resonates with previous research linking future orientation to decreased risks of maladjustment in adulthood, particularly among individuals with adverse childhood experiences (Cui et al., 2020; Schmid et al., 2011; Stoddard et al., 2011). Future orientation appears intertwined with individual-level mechanisms and broader socio-cultural factors, impacting the assurance or hindrance of human development (Cohen-Scali et al., 2022).

In resource-limited settings like Kosovo, job quality becomes critical for emerging adults. This situation places them at significant risk, fostering a sense of aimlessness and uncertainty about their life trajectory (Wong & Fry, 1998). Meaningful jobs are important for survival, social, and self-determination needs. When these needs are not fulfilled, emerging adults see their work as insufficient, resulting in reduced well-being and a grim outlook on their future (Blustein, 2008; Blustein et al., 2016; Duffy et al., 2016). Regarding post-traumatic responses, participants developed meaning and posttraumatic growth after adverse events by connecting them to improved interpersonal relationships or shifts in the ways they perceive challenges. In emerging adulthood, this is often a self-focused process, as emerging adults learn to be independent, make difficult decisions, and use adaptive coping strategies (Arnett, 2006).

The main regulatory strengths that emerged from the analysis are emotion regulation, coping skills, adaptability, and dignity. Coping skills were an important factor for regulation among these young adults. This result is in line with other studies that suggest that the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional reactions as well as a positive attitude towards tolerating adverse situations help overcome challenges (Ho et al., 2019). Participants also demonstrated strength in adaptability, effectively navigating challenges or adversities that demanded rapid adjustment. This closely aligns with the concept of flexibility (Bonanno, 2004), suggesting that successful adaptation is associated with the capacity to dynamically regulate emotional expression, either amplifying or suppressing it as needed. Such flexibility also includes being able to choose from a portfolio of assets and resources in order to overcome adversity.

Kelmendi and Hamby (2023) found that dignity is associated with resilience in collectivist European contexts. Kelmendi & Hamby's review found that dignity was related to respect, hospitality, and good behavior directed towards others. In our study, participants discussed dignity more in terms of preservation of personal values and boundaries. This may be due to the intersection of cultural values and

developmental stages. Even though Kosovo is considered a country with a collectivist culture, young people are often especially focused on the self (Prasnikar et al., 2006). Emerging adults are focused on several developmental milestones, including developing a sense of self, self-determination, independence, agency, and belief systems (Cepa & Furstenberg, 2021). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that their concepts of dignity focus on these areas.

The main interpersonal factors that emerged were peer and family support. However, in both cases, family members and peers were also identified as a burden for some participants. This mixed profile for interpersonal resources has been found in other resilience portfolio studies as well (e.g., Hamby et al., 2018; Hamby et al., 2020). Particularly in collectivist societies and family-oriented societies, family support can help soothe trauma and adverse experiences (Acero et al., 2017; Herrera et al., 2011). However, just as families can provide support and promote well-being, at the same time, the absence of this support can lead to vulnerability and distress (Kellezi et al., 2019; Parra et al., 2018).

In a collectivist society, cultural norms play a crucial role in defining familial roles and approaches to resolving family conflicts (Chadda & Deb, 2013; McGill, 1992). Despite the emphasis on family ties, individuals in such societies may refrain from seeking emotional support from their relatives. This tendency stems from the collectivist imperative to avoid expressing emotions openly to prevent interpersonal disputes and not cause inconvenience to others (Yeh et al., 2006). However, Kosovo is also considered a country in transition in terms of the primacy of collectivism, where younger generations prefer more individualism and independence (Prasnikar et al., 2006).

Resilience Strengths Among LGBTQ+ Participants

Many of the findings were replicated for issues related to LGBTQ+ identity. For example, developing a sense of identity, this time specifically in reference to LGBTQ+ identity, was a prominent topic, associated with their experiences of coming out. Within this group, the act of coming out was embraced as a transformative experience, evoking sentiments of relief and fostering self-discovery among participants. Furthermore, this disclosure process has been correlated with higher self-esteem and reduced rates of depression (Kosciw et al., 2012), along with lower manifestations of anxiety, depression, and burnout (Juster et al., 2013). On the other hand, concealing one's LGBTQ+ identity has been linked to lower psychological well-being and increased occurrences of depressive symptoms (Riggle et al., 2016). Regarding interpersonal resources, there were again the twin and somewhat opposing themes of drawing strength from peer and family when support was available, but also having to navigate peer and familial rejection as another adversity when it was not. Although social support is essential for resilience, participants' experiences of navigating rejection from family

and society highlight the complexity of their interpersonal resources. These results echo but also add nuance to prior research with LGBTQ+ communities, which tend to either emphasize the importance of social support (e.g., Asakura, 2019; McConnell et al., 2015), or problems with low levels of family attachment and support (Eisenberg et al., 2017; Saewyc et al., 2009). Unlike other comments on interpersonal resources, there was some mention of discrimination and homophobia by LGBTQ+ participants—in other words making reference to a broader social problem and not just a single dysfunctional family.

Participants also highlighted drag performances as a resource. Drag performance has been associated with resilience, receiving social support, and fostering empowerment (Knutson, 2018, 2023). Similar to our study, individuals engaged in drag said that performing serves as both an outlet for self-expression and minimizing negative emotions, while also functioning as a means of self-acceptance. Prior research indicates Kosovo has a high level of homophobia (Center for Equality and Liberty, 2018). Sometimes, for young Kosovar people, coming out to the family means losing their support and sometimes even leaving home (Center for Equality and Liberty, 2018), an important source of trauma not identified by non-LGBTQ+ participants. These findings emphasize the significance of understanding resilience in the context of LGBTQ+ identity within a post-conflict society like Kosovo, where high levels of homophobia and potential family rejection pose specific challenges for young LGBTQ+ individuals.

Limitations

To the authors' knowledge, this study is the first empirical study in the Kosovar context that explores psychosocial strengths through the lens of the resilience portfolio model, and one of only a few on resilience in Kosovo. Although the sample was diverse in terms of gender and LGBTQ+ identities, the lack of diversity in other characteristics (ethnicity, religion) among the participants can be considered a limitation. Moreover, the study did not include formally assessing the cultural context or participants' victimization histories. Although the interview included a question about national meaning-making, there wasn't an explicit question about the challenges of resilience related to living in the post-conflict context of Kosovo. Future research should consider using different recruitment strategies instead of snowball sampling, as used in this study, to mitigate potential biases arising from the author's existing network connections. Further, although we did engage in some member checking and triangulation, future research could expand on these aspects of the methodology. Given the lack of research on Kosovo emerging adults, our study serves as a foundation for future research to build upon, potentially expanding the scope and significance of our findings.

Theoretical, Research and Practice Implications

The findings from this research hold important implications for future research and practice. First, the results show the

influence of the developmental phase in the growth of psychosocial strengths that support resilience. In this regard, we highlight that despite the cultural and contextual differences, young adults in Kosovo share similarities with their counterparts elsewhere in terms of developmental milestones and young adulthood as an age of identity formation and renegotiating family relationships. In line with this, intervention programs used to promote specific developmental milestones during this period (e.g., transition to higher education, leaving the family home) have been successful (Testa et al., 2010) and could be extended to Kosovo. Also, ambiguity related to family as both potential support and burden needs better recognition in prevention and intervention.

In addition, the potential of expressive writing and mindfulness as low-cost tools for facilitating meaning-making among emerging adults in Kosovo could be of significant practical importance. Mindfulness helps people accept the content of their thinking without judgment and rejection, and promotes emotion regulation, meaning-making, and well-being (Chu & Mak, 2020; Manco & Hamby, 2021). Expressive writing is considered a helpful tool for helping people organize events in their life, process their meaning, and shift the focus from adversity to growth (Banyard et al., 2016; Park, 2016). These approaches could be valuable in a cultural context like Kosovo, where emerging adults are gradually transitioning from collectivist to individualist values, as value-based narratives could aid in understanding personal priorities and inform their sense of identity. These interventions also do not require providers with advanced training, which can be hard to access in Kosovo. Although there is a lack of data regarding similar interventions with young adults in Kosovo, interventions including mindfulness exercises have been shown to be successful for younger populations. Results from mindfulness programs implemented in Kosovo elementary schools showed that this age group experienced lower stress levels and improved mindfulness understanding (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2023; Rukovci et al., 2021). Similarly, previous studies in this context show that social activism and engagement in community activities is associated with higher levels of posttraumatic growth and adaptive responding for emerging adults (Arenliu et al., 2019; Jerliu et al., 2019).

The study also highlights the importance of supporting and empowering vulnerable groups such as the LGBTQ+ community living in Kosovo. Based on the lack of social and government support that these groups experience, it is recommended that research with these groups should recognize challenges and provide safe spaces (Erickson-Schroth & Glaeser, 2017). However, according to Johns et al. (2019), more extensive research of the resilience process of these groups is necessary to understand their experiences at the individual level and interpersonal levels. The results shed light on the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in Kosovo, highlighting the necessity for policy adjustments concerning that promote equal rights and opportunities. By recognizing the unique needs and struggles of this community,

updated policies can enable a more compassionate and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ individuals to thrive and feel safe in their country home.

In conclusion, findings from this study provide critical insights regarding the resilience portfolio model, with findings from this post-conflict, southeastern European country showing similarities to work done in other locales, but also themes of dignity and adaptability that have seldom been examined in the context of resilience portfolios. Further, the LGBTQ+ participants highlighted interpersonal resources such as the process of coming out and the relational benefits of drag identities that have received very little attention in resilience research. Although there are elements of the developmental phase of emerging adulthood which were similar here to other research with this group, it is important to study how developmental challenges manifest in different cultural settings.

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The raw data, analysis code, and materials used in this study are not openly available but are available upon request to the corresponding author. No aspects of the study were pre-registered.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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