**5. Discussion**

This doctoral thesis explored the relationship between trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms in the Israeli population, comparing the Jewish participant group with the different Arab participant groups, exploring group differences between various Arab minority groups, and examining the potential moderating role of perceived community resilience and the potential mediating role of perceived threat. The study assessed: 1) group differences in levels of exposure to different types of traumas, PTSD symptoms, perceived threat (overall threat and its types), and perceived community resilience; 2) the mediating role of perceived threat between trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms and the moderating role of perceived community resilience on the relationship between trauma exposure and perceived threat. The findings show differences in the levels of trauma exposure, overall perceived threat, identity threat, and socio-political threat between the Jewish group and the different Arab groups as well as within the different Arab groups. The findings support the role of perceived threat in mediating the relationship between trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms but not the role of perceived community resilience in moderating the relationship between trauma exposure and perceived threat.

This section will discuss the results, their relationship to previous studies, and the theoretical and practical implications. It concludes with the study limitations and implications for future research concerning trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms among Jewish and Arab groups, as well as within the Arab minority groups.

**5. 1. Group Differences in the Levels of** **Trauma Exposure, Overall Perceived Threat and its Types, Perceived Community Resilience, and PTSD Symptoms**

The current study assessed the levels of trauma exposure, perceived threat, perceived community resilience, PTSD symptoms of the Jewish majority and groups of the Arab minority including Arab Muslims, Arab Bedouins, and Arab Christians.

The findings showed higher levels of trauma exposure for the Jewish group who reported exposure to 3-4 trauma types as compared to all of the Arab groups who reported exposure to 0-2 trauma types, as in Saltzman et al. (2022). No significant differences were reported within the Arab groups. It is possible that this may be attributed to the Jewish majority experiencing higher exposure to terror attacks (Saltzman et al., 2022), and the mandatory military service for the Jewish citizens, as compared to Arab Muslim and Christian groups who are not mandated to serve. Cultural norms of Arab society related to privacy and disclosure may have also contributed to underreporting exposure to traumatic events (Saltzman et al., 2022). Despite the different levels and types of trauma exposure, the current findings suggest that all of the groups experienced exposure to multiple types of trauma (polytrauma) with a mean of 2.86 traumatic events, not limited to war and terror trauma. Previous studies found that Arab citizens are more likely to experience other kinds of trauma exposures including those related to elevated and persistent discrimination (Pew Research Center, 2016; Radai et al., 2015; Yonay et al., 2014). Additionally, Arab society continues to be challenged by escalating levels of violence within their own community among adults and youth (Ron et al., 2022).

Significant group differences were found for overall perceived threat, which was higher for the Arab Muslim group than the Jewish group. Previous studies reveal mixed findings related to perceived threat with some documenting higher levels for the Jewish group while others documenting higher levels for the Arab group (Kimhi et al., 2017; Leykin et al., 2015; Shechory Bitton & Silawi, 2019). In research, Arab samples have been mostly treated as a homogeneous group and without differentiation, which may have promoted inaccurate assumptions about the different groups and findings in the research. For example, in this study, the Arab group is demographically heterogeneous with lower educational and income levels and higher religiosity level for the Muslim participants as compared to the Christian group, which reports a higher educational and income levels, and lower religiosity levels. However, most studies disregard these sociodemographic characteristics that may influence identity and responses to traumatic events (Ryder et al., 2021).

Group differences between the Jewish and the Arab Muslim groups were found in certain types of perceived threat but not in others. More specifically, the Arab Muslim group reported significantly higher levels of identity threat and socio- political threat than the Jewish group, which reported the lowest level. This confirms Kimhi et al.’s (2017) findings that the Jewish and Arab groups differ in their levels of perceived threat types. However, the current study contradicts Kimhi et al.’s (2017) assertion that the Jewish group experiences higher levels of violence/ terror and war threats. The results show that Jewish and Arab Muslim samples did not significantly differ in their levels of violence/ terror and war threats but the Muslim group showed higher levels of identity and socio-political threats. This may be explained by the ongoing Arab-Jewish tension and the status of the Arab minority as a disadvantaged group (Smooha, 2019), who experience higher discrimination and marginalization (Braun-Lewensohn, 2014; Haj-Yahia et. al, 2019; Yaish, & Gabay-Egozi, 2021), live under the threat of stigmatization (Hackl, 2020), and social inequality (Keshet & Popper-Giveon, 2016), which tend to intensify upon the escalation of political conflicts. This is particularly relevant for the Arab Muslim group which previously reported experiencing higher discrimination than other Arab groups (Radai et al., 2015).

The higher levels of identity and socio- political threats documented by the Arab Muslim group may also be partly attributed to socio-economic differences (CBS, 2021; Haj-Yahia et. al, 2019;Haj-Yahya et. al ,2021; Larom, 2018). Previous studies validated that the Muslim group suffers from lack or/and limited access to material and psychosocial resources (Haj-Yahya et. el ,2021; Yaish & Gabay-Egozi, 2021). The Arab minority as a whole is challenged by limited access and unequal distribution of essential resources, as compared to the Jewish majority (Smooha, 2019), which intensifies their fear of losing further ground, already limited resources, and the ability to cope and recover.

In addition, overall perceived threat levels differed among the Arab groups with Muslim participants reporting higher levels than Arab Christians. Arab Christian participants reported the highest levels of income and educational levels compared to both the Muslim and Bedouin groups in the current study and have previously been found to have a more positive attitude toward Israel than the Muslim group (Radai et al., 2015). Arab Christians are more similar culturally to the secular Jewish community than to more traditional Arab Muslims (Radai et al., 2015). The current findings show that 56% of Christian participants rated their religiosity level as secular while it was 48.7% for the Jewish participants, 1.7% for the Bedouin participants, and 5.8% for the Muslim participants. In addition, more Christian citizens tend to support the Zionist political parties rather than the Muslim ones (Yonay et al., 2014). This notion may be somewhat threatening to the Arab Muslim group who view the situation as promoting division within the Arab minority and increases their own sense of marginalization.

The findings also showed different levels of identity and socio- political feelings of threat among the different Arab groups, highlighting significantly higher levels for the Muslim group followed by the Bedouin group and lowest for Christian participants. First, and as mentioned earlier, the higher threat levels reported among the Muslim group may be reflective of their higher exposure to discrimination and limited access to various psychosocial resources (Braun-Lewensohn, 2014; Haj-Yahia et. al, 2019). Second, the lower levels of perceived threat among the Bedouin group compared to the Muslim group may be attributed to the voluntarily participation of some Bedouin citizens in the military service, which afford them additional social and financial benefits (Ben-Asher & Bokek-Cohen, 2017; Yahel & Abu-Ajaj, 2021). However, their higher levels of perceived threat compared to the Christian group may be related to their status as a minority group within a minority who suffers from the highest poverty and unemployment rates as well as lower income and educational levels (CBS, 2021; Sirota & Hajajra, 2019). Furthermore, some Bedouin citizens may be subject to potential social conflicts and rejection within their community for serving in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) (Ben-Asher & Bokek-Cohen, 2017; Caspi et al., 2015). As to the significantly lower identity and socio- political threats for the Christian sample, it may be attributed to the lower level of discrimination they experience compared to their Muslim counterparts as found in previous research (Radai et al., 2015).

The threat levels reported by Arab participants suggest that they experience different degrees and types of threat. The source of threat for each group may differ from one another. The Arab Christian group for instance may be subjected to threats within the Arab community (Melcangi & Maggiolini, 2020), as a ‘minority within a minority’ (Radai et al., 2015) or as a ‘minority of two majorities’ as stated by Agbaria & Obeid Shehadeh (2022), in which they feel alienated in the Arab society (Radai et al., 2015). The increasing level of violence in the Arab community (CBS, 2021) is also a concern for Arab Christians (Haider, 2017; Melcangi & Maggiolini, 2020). This insecurity of Arab Christians has been documented in Israel and across the Middle East (Haider, 2017; Melcangi & Maggiolini, 2020; “Saint James Vicariate”, 2023; Weiner, 2008), and has contributed to their increased emigration from the region (Haider, 2017). Their representation within the Middle East has declined from 14% in the 20th century to nearly 5% and is projected to decline to 3% by 2050 (Melcangi & Maggiolini, 2020). The CBS (2022) reports that the current percentage of the Arab Christian population in Israel is only at 1.52%.

No significant differences were found between the study groups in their levels of perceived community resilience. The findings documented equal levels of perceived community resilience among all groups, which is inconsistent with previous findings showing lower community resilience among the Arab group compared to the Jewish group (Kimhi et al. 2017; Leykin et al., 2015; Marciano et al. 2020). It is unclear whether the lack of significant differences between groups may be attributed to the time of measuring perceived community resilience, namely during a relatively peaceful period rather than during or just following a time of crisis. Community resilience is complex, changes over time, and depends on the utilization of community resources (Faulkner et al., 2018). Social support is a protective factor and a core element of community resilience (Leykin et al., 2013). While true that the Arab society within Israel has limited access to supportive resources, it maintains a strong collectivist orientation that relies on family ties and religious values for support in times of crises (Azaiza, 2013; Haj Yahia, 2019; Younes, 2007). This is in contrast to the Jewish society, which has mostly changed from a collective to an individualistic orientation (Sharabi et al., 2019) and has more access to supportive resources in times of crises. Despite the imbalance in systemic supportive resources, the collectivist orientation may serve as a compensatory buffer that fosters community resilience for the Arab community

The similar levels of community resilience among the study groups may also be attributed to periodic trauma exposure (Stein et al., 2018). The Israeli ethnic groups are challenged by ongoing stressors whether political, social, extended trauma exposure, and threat of potential war, all of which can compel their continuous adaptation (Gelkopf et al., 2013; Gelkopf et al., 2017; Stein et al., 2018). Moreover, except for the 8% of the Arab population residing in mixed cities (e.g., Haifa, Nof Hagalil, Lod), the similar levels of perceived community resilience within the different Arab groups may be attributed to their utilization of the similar health, social, economic, and educational resources offered in their community, which are established separately from the Jewish sector (Ron et al., 2022).

No significant differences in PTSD symptoms were found between the Jewish group and all of the Arab participant groups, and no significant differences were found between the various Arab minority groups. This contradicts previous research showing higher symptomatology among the Arab group compared to the Jewish group (Khatib et al., 2021; Kimhi et al., 2017; Ron, 2014; Saltzman et al., 2022) and differing levels of symptoms among the different Arab groups (Ryder et al., 2021). This may be explained by the overall integration between the study risk and protective factors particularly between perceived threat and community resilience. First and foremost, a negative correlation was found between perceived threat and community resilience while both correlated with trauma exposure and PTSD symptomatology. These findings reaffirm the important roles of perceived threat and community resilience in the relationship between trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms found in previous studies (Goral et al., 2017; Kim & Oh, 2020; Leykin et al. 2015; Park & Bae, 2022; Patel et al., 2017). For example, despite the higher levels of trauma exposure reported by the Jewish participants and the higher levels of perceived threat reported by the Arab Muslim group, the interaction between community resilience and perceived threat has contributed to their low symptomatology and to the lack of significant differences between all the study groups. That is to say, perceived community resilience may have assisted the groups to cope with the threat and thus contributed to their low and similar level of symptoms.

**5.2. Perceived Threat Mediating the Relationship of trauma Exposure and PTSD Symptoms and Perceived Community Resilience Moderating the Effect of Trauma Exposure on Perceived Threat**

Consistent with previous studies (Renshaw, 2011; Lapid Pickman et al., 2017), the findings of this study showed that perceived threat significantly mediated the relationship between trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms. These findings confirmed our hypothesis and support the notion that threat serves as a mediator in such a relationship. This study also examined the moderating role of perceived community resilience on the relationship between trauma exposure and perceived threat. The results showed that perceived community resilience did not significantly moderate the relationship between trauma exposure and perceived threat but still correlated negatively with trauma exposure and the PTSD symptoms. This indicates that community resilience does play a role in the relationship between trauma exposure and the development of symptomatology, as found in previous research (Patel et al., 2017); however, it does not moderate the relationship between trauma exposure and perceived threat. These novel findings show that perceived community resilience in itself does not prevent or negate traumatic exposure or an individual’s perception of threat. The threat of terror attacks, political instability, discrimination, and hardship facing various ethnic groups is ever- present and embedded into the population’s psyche. Terrorist attacks and political instability create a ripple effect that impacts the relationship between the Arab and Jewish community and their overall level of perceived threat and security. While community resilience does not change this national landscape or its reality; perhaps, its most important function is to nurture people’s ability to cope with that threat and hence prevent or minimize the development of PTSD symptomatology.

**5.3. Theoretical and Practical Implications**

This doctoral dissertation presents theoretical and practical implications for understanding risk and protective factors that contribute to the prevalence of PTSD in countries with persistent trauma exposure and large minority representation. Although there are numerous studies examining the Israeli population during times of conflict and war (Braun-Lewensohn, 2014; Gelkopf et al., 2017; Gil et al., 2016; Lapid Pickman et al., 2017), this study provided novel findings about the mediating role of perceived threat in the relationship between trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms during a relatively calm period. There is value to studying the various ethnic groups thereby assessing their different vulnerabilities and dynamics.

This study also contributed to the literature concerning perceived community resilience as related to trauma exposure and perceived threat. More importantly, it explored differences between the Jewish and Arab groups and the often overlooked differences for the Israeli Arab minority, consisting of Muslims, Bedouins, and Christians. The findings suggest that psychological outcomes and community resilience are relatively the same for all groups, despite the higher level of trauma exposure for the Jewish majority and the higher level of perceived threat for the Muslim group. The findings also call attention to the consequent development of mental health issues due to people’s perception of threat. Moreover, the finding that perceived threat for the Arab Muslim group was the highest among the study groups demonstrates that the existing differences between the Arab minority groups need to be taken into consideration when conducting research.

Based upon the significant positive relationships that were found in the current study between perceived threat and PTSD symptomatology and the significant mediating role of perceived threat found between trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms, this study also stresses the importance of managing the levels of perceived threat to minimize the likelihood of subsequent PTSD symptomatology. Moreover, according to the significant negative relationship that was found between perceived community resilience and symptomatology, this study emphasizes the importance of enhancing community resilience to support the overall coping and wellbeing of all ethnic groups within Israel. Trauma destabilizes and undermines mental health and wellbeing, thus, this study calls for the provision of more equitable resources and support systems to ensure overall adaptation and resilience. Finally, considering ethnic diversity and the unique characteristics of all ethnic groups within Israel is important and ensures accurate assessment and attention to inclusive research, policies, and practices.

**5.4. Limitations**

This study has a few notable limitations. First, it focused on Jewish and Arab groups as a representation of the Israeli population, however, the Arab Druze were not included due to their small sample size. The unique characteristics of this group and their participation in the military service warrants inclusion for comparative analysis with the Jewish group, and proper assessment of group differences within the Arab minority. Moreover, the Druze’s participation in the study may have yielded a different perspective and statistical outcomes for the total sample. Second, this study was limited in assessing only PTSD symptoms; assessing other stress related problems may have provided further understanding as to the differential responses to trauma. Third, since this research is cross- sectional, it was conducted during a relatively calm period and while the level of external threat was low; however, other studies undertaken during different time period, for instance during escalation of political conflict or war, may provide different results. Fourth, as the study was cross-sectional it was not possible to examine the direction of these relationships (e.g., between perceived threat and PTSD symptoms). Fifth, the sample was selected in a way that is roughly representative of the Israeli population (by age, gender, and residence); however, it was not randomized, and included an additional oversampling of Arab respondents which may restrict the generalization of the findings. Sixth, the study is based on a self- report survey which limited our control over the way the participants completed the questionnaire; therefore, the results may be affected by biases, such as the social desirability effect; therefore, further research is warranted using more objective measures such as interviews and objective assessments of community resilience.

**5.5. Recommendations for Future Studies**

It was not feasible for the current study to include the Druze population due to their small size, however, their inclusion is important for comparative purposes and understanding group differences. Future studies are needed to examine factors that contribute to the elevated levels of perceived threat for the Muslim group. While the study examined the Jewish and Arab participants, it did not examine whether different minority groups within the Jewish population (e.g., Ashkenazi vs Sephardi; Haredi vs non-Haredi) have different levels of trauma exposure, PTSD symptoms, perceived threat, or perceived community resilience. This is important to ensure inclusive application of culturally responsive policies and practices and in promoting the mental health of all segments of the population. Such studies would be informative as they shed light on other social, economic, and political dynamics within the Israeli society. While this study offered novel findings, further studies are still needed to fill the knowledge gap in this area of research by exploring the differential exposure and responses as they relate to group differences within the Arab minority and Jewish majority, and the factors that contribute to perceived threat and resilience. For example, religiosity level, living in communities exposed to terror or community violence, identity, political persuasion, and other factors that may influence the variables noted in this study. Finally, replicating this study during periods of conflict escalation is important for comparative purposes and to examine the direction of some of these associations.