

Being a sexual minority, online sexual victimization and risks (OSVR), and mental health outcomes

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ABSTRACT

The first aim of this study was to analyze the prevalence and frequency of different forms of online sexual victimization and risks among sexual minorities, including sexting, sexual orientation- and gender-based victimization, unwanted sexual attention, sextortion, and revenge porn. The second aim was to examine whether online sexual victimization and risks mediate the relationship between being a sexual minority and mental health outcomes, including depression and anxiety. The sample was composed of 1779 adolescents (50.9% girls) between 12 and 18 years old (mean age = 13.92, SD = 1.27), and 146 of them (8.2%) were sexual minorities (specifically, bisexual, homosexual, pansexual, asexual, or queer adolescents). About 17.3% of sexual minority adolescents have sent a sext. Four out of ten adolescents (41.1%) had experienced online sexual orientation discrimination and 28.4% gender-based victimization. More than forty percent (45.2%) experienced unwanted sexual attention, 9% were victims of sextortion, and 5.5% had been targets of revenge porn. Sexting, online sexual orientation victimization and gender-based victimization, and unwanted sexual attention partially mediated the relationship between being a sexual minority and mental health outcomes (i.e., depression and anxiety). More prevention programs aimed to reduce online sexual victimization and risks for sexual minorities are needed.

METHODS

Participants

The initial study sample was made up of 1,801 adolescents. Considering the objectives of this study, 22 adolescents (1.2%) who did not indicate their sexual orientation were excluded. Thus, the final sample was made up of 1,779 adolescents between 12 and 18 years old (mean age = 13.92, SD = 1.27). Among them, 906 (51.3%) were women, 861 (48.4%) were men and 12 (0.7%) did not indicate sex. From the entire sample, 146 (8.2%) pertained to a sexual minority: 103 were bisexual, 31 homosexual, nine were asexual, two were pansexual and one indicated queer/aromantic. The rest of the sample (n = 1633) were heterosexual (91.8%).

Procedure

Ten schools in the community of Madrid, Spain, were randomly selected, including 8 public schools and two private schools. The period of data collection was from November 2019 to March 2020. Participants' responses were kept anonymous to promote honesty, and participation was voluntary. Parents received a letter asking signed and explicit consent for their children's participation in the study. The questionnaire required approximately 30–40 minutes to complete. This study is part of a larger research project on online sexual abuse of minors, which was reviewed and approved by the Ethic Committee.

RESULTS

Table 1.

Prevalence (previous year) of OSVR (signification levels controlling for sex and age).

	Sexual minorities n = 146	Heterosexual n = 1632	Odd ratio	Sign. level
Sexting	17.3%	7.1%	2.92 (1.75 – 5.13)	
Sexual orientation harassment	41.1%	3 %	20.71 (13.13 – 32.70)	< .001
Gender role harassment	28.4%	8.8%	3.81 (2.51 – 5.76)	< .001
Unwanted sexual attention	45.2%	22 %	2.56 (1.74 – 3.75)	< .001
Sextortion	9 %	3.4%	2.69 (1.41 – 5.13)	< .01
Revenge porn	5.5%	3.2%	1.69 (0.77 -3.67)	ns

The results are presented in Table 1. Regarding sexting, 17.3% of sexual minority adolescents participated in the sending of sexual content. Four out ten adolescents (41.1%) of sexual minorities were discriminated against online because of their sexual orientation, and more than one in four adolescents (28.4%) experienced discrimination due to their gender roles. More than forty percent (45.2%) experienced unwanted sexual attention, 9% encountered sextortion, and 5.5% were victims of revenge porn. Sexual minorities experienced a significantly higher proportion of all forms of online sexual victimization than heterosexuals except revenge porn, where there were no significant differences. The size of the effect of the differences in the types of gender victimization (i.e., gender roles and sexual orientation victimization) were medium to large. The remaining significant differences between groups approached medium-effect sizes.

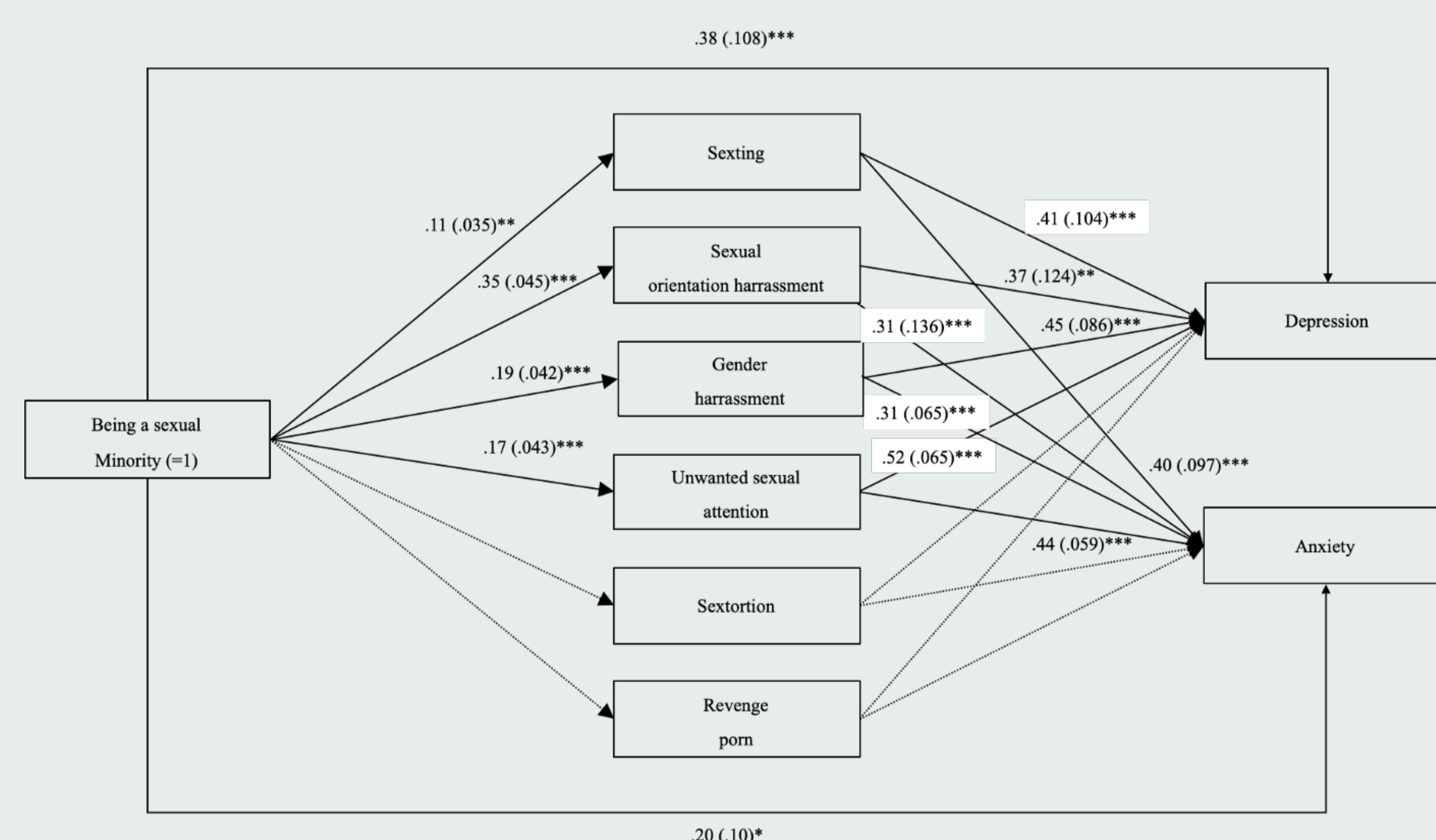
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Fig. 1 presents the results of the estimated model. The modification indices provided by EQS recommended addition of the correlation between different model error terms (e.g., sexual orientation victimization and gender-based victimization; depression and anxiety symptoms). Given that these correlations are theoretically sound, we added them to the model (Byrne, 2013). Following Cole and Maxwell (2003), non-standardized coefficients and standard errors are presented. The final model showed satisfactory fit indices [χ^2 (12, N = 1609) = 47.829, NFI = 0.97, CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.04, and RMSEA = 0.043 (90% CI 0.031–0.056)].

As displayed in Fig. 1, the direct relationships between being a sexual minority and depression (standardized coefficient = 0.12, $p < .001$) and anxiety (standardized coefficient = 0.13, $p < .001$) were significant. In other words, identifying as a sexual minority increased the scores for depression and anxiety. The model shown in Fig. 1 also suggests the presence of several indirect relationships between being a sexual minority and mental health outcomes.



Note: The values given are non-standardized coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. Sex and age were included as control variables in the model. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p > .001$

Fig. 1. Structural equation model for the relation between being a sexual minority, OSVR, and mental health outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

- This is one of the first studies to systematically analyze a set of OSVR among sexual minorities and to include indicators of prevalence and frequency.
- The data suggest that sexual minorities continue to be victims online. Furthermore, OSVR is significantly related to worse mental health outcomes.
- The design of specific prevention programs that educate and reduce the incidence of OSVR is crucial.
- It is also essential that mental health professionals working with sexual minorities are alert to possible victimization experiences and the potential consequences for clients' psychosocial outcomes.
- Finally, much remains to be done to eradicate homophobic attitudes that discriminate against sexual minorities. Studies that provide empirical information are a necessary first step.