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Understanding associations between exposure to violent pornography and teen dating violence among female sexual minority high school students

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Abstract

Introduction: Previous research indicates that teen dating violence (TDV) is more common among sexual minority than heterosexual adolescents, with approximately half of female sexual minority adolescents (SMA) endorsing TDV victimization in the last year. In samples of adolescents without regard to sexual orientation, exposure to violent pornography is associated with TDV, but this relationship has not been assessed in female SMA.

Methods: The sample consisted of 10th grade high school students aged 14–17 who identified as cisgender females (N = 1276). Data were collected from a baseline survey prior to the delivery of a sexual assault prevention intervention.

Results: Female SMA had 2.54 times the odds (95%CI [1.75, 3.69]) of being exposed to violent pornography and 2.53 times the odds (95%CI [1.72, 3.70)]) of TDV exposure compared to heterosexual girls. Exposure to violent pornography was not associated with involvement in TDV among female SMA, controlling for episodic heavy drinking (aOR = 2.25, 95%CI [0.88,6.22]).

Discussion: Given the relatively higher rates of violent pornography and TDV exposure among female SMA compared to heterosexual girls, it is critical that sex education curricula address these experiences and meet the needs of adolescents of all sexual orientations. Future research can assess how these TDV interventions might be tailored for female SMA. Although we did not find that exposure to violent pornography was associated with TDV among female SMA, these investigations should be replicated with larger data sets, given that the association between exposure to violent pornography and engagement in TDV was in the expected direction.

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Keywords

sexually explicit media; pornography; intimate partner violence; dating violence; sexual minority youth; sexual minority girls

Previous research indicates that teen dating violence (TDV) is more common among high school-aged sexual minority adolescents (SMA) than heterosexual adolescents (Dank et al., 2014; Luo et al., 2014; Norris & Orchowski, 2020). Additionally, there are observed gender disparities in TDV, with some investigations also looking at the intersection of gender and sexual orientation. For example, girls tend to report higher rates of bidirectional violence (i.e., victimization and perpetration) in their relationships than do boys (Swahn, et al., 2010), although specific types of victimization and perpetration vary by gender. Specifically, girls are more likely than boys to report perpetrating physical aggression but less likely to report perpetrating sexual violence and instead more likely to be sexually victimized by partners (Wincentak et al., 2017). Male and female SMA appear to both have elevated risk for experiencing dating violence compared to heterosexual adolescents (Martin-Storey, 2015). Some research does suggest that girls – without regard to sexual orientation – are more likely than boys to endorse certain types of violence (Dank et al., 2014). However, research on teen dating violence at the intersection of gender and sexual orientation is sparse, and the study by Dank et al. computed a chi-square for the global contrast between male, female, and transgender youth, limiting ability to draw comparisons specifically between male and female SMA. The existing research on female SMA suggests rates of victimization may be higher than among female heterosexual adolescents (e.g., Luo et al., 2014), with a recent study of high school students in the Northeast finding that approximately half of the female SMA participants endorsed TDV victimization in the last year (Norris & Orchowski, 2020).

In addition, little is known about risk factors for TDV among SMA (e.g., Dank et al., 2014; Rostad et al., 2020), whose relationships can differ in important ways from heterosexual adolescents. For example, SMA relationships may form in the context of minority stress (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017) and a potentially limited pool of available partners (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015), which may influence risk factors for TDV. One well-documented risk factor associated with TDV is alcohol use (e.g., Choi et al., 2017), and this association has begun to be explored among female SMA (e.g., Rostad et al., 2020). Exposure to violence, both directly and witnessed, is also associated with TDV victimization (e.g. Hamby et al., 2012) and perpetration (e.g., Cadely et al., 2019). Violent pornography is one understudied form of violence exposure that might be associated with TDV. In samples of adolescents without regard to sexual orientation, exposure to violent pornography in particular is associated with TDV (Rostad et al., 2019), but this relationship has not been directly assessed among female SMA. However, there is reason to believe that female SMA might be more likely to be exposed to pornography, including violent pornography. SMA are generally more likely to access sexual health information online than heterosexual adolescents due to limited access to relevant sexual health information (Mitchell et al., 2014). For example, male SMA report that learning about desired sexual activities is a motivation for using pornography (Nelson, Perry, & Carey, 2019). The limited research on the rates of female SMA's pornography use has yielded mixed results (Bőthe et al., 2019);

a Swiss study found no significant difference in use rates in the past 30 days between heterosexual and female SMA (Luder et al., 2011), whereas a Swedish study found that bisexual girls were more likely to report ever using pornography (Mattebo et al., 2016). More recently, in a Canadian study, sexual and gender minority girls were more likely to have used pornography by age 14 compared to heterosexual cisgender girls (Bőthe et al., 2020). To our knowledge, no research in the United States (U.S.) has been published focusing on female SMA's exposure to pornography. Given the potentially higher rates of exposure to pornography among SMA regardless of gender, it is important to study pornography exposure and TDV experiences among female SMA within a U.S. context.

Further, violent pornography exposure might be related to TDV exposure through sexual scripts. Sexual scripts are frameworks that reflect shared cultural beliefs, similar to scripts for scenes in a play, that delineate how a sexual interaction ought to occur and the roles each participant should perform (Simon & Gagnon, 1984, 1986). These scripts are learned by the actors who then adapt and enact the script in a specific sexual situation (Simon & Gagnon, 1984, 1986). Given that pornography viewers may acquire and then enact sexual scripts with partners and that pornography has been shown to influence the sexual relationships of male SMA (Nelson, Perry, & Carey, 2019), exploring whether exposure to violent pornography is associated with TDV among female SMA is warranted.

Purpose of the Current Study

To our knowledge, the current study is the first to assess the rates of exposure to violent pornography among female SMA in the United States and the relations between violent pornography exposure and teen dating violence among female SMA. Our first hypothesis was that the rates of exposure to violent pornography and TDV would be higher among SMG than heterosexual girls. Our second hypothesis was that exposure to violent pornography would be associated with greater likelihood of TDV among female SMA.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Study procedures have been described in detail elsewhere (e.g., Rostad et al., 2019; Norris & Orchowski, 2020). Briefly, secondary data analysis was conducted using data from the baseline assessment of a sexual assault prevention intervention for 10th grade students at 27 schools in the Northeastern U.S. The dataset for this study included only cisgender girls ages 14–17 who reported their sexual orientation and exposure to violence pornography (N = 1276). Sixty-nine participants did not respond to the violent pornography measure and were excluded from the sample. There were no differences between those who did and did not answer the violent pornography measure in terms of sexual orientation status. There were too few transgender participants for substantive analyses. The majority of girls identified as heterosexual (86.21%), with 10.34% identifying as bisexual, 2.43% as gay/lesbian, and 1.02% as queer.

Prior to the survey administration, guardians were sent a mailing allowing them to specify if they prefer their child not participate. Participants whose parents did not opt them out of

research provided verbal assent to participate in the study. Approvals for the research were obtained from the local Institutional Review Board, the Department of Education, and the school boards/head of school of the participating schools. Students completed the surveys on either a laptop or a paper copy and surveys took approximately 45–60 minutes to complete. Participants were not compensated for completing this survey.

Measures

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation—For the purposes of this study, cisgender girls were identified as participants who selected "girl" from among the options: boy, girl, transgender, or prefer not to answer. For sexual orientation, participants were asked if they would describe themselves as heterosexual, gay/lesbian, queer, bisexual, or prefer not to answer. Sexual orientation was dichotomized to reflect heterosexual and female SMA (i.e., gay/lesbian, queer, bisexual). For both questions, participants who selected "prefer not to answer" were excluded from analyses, as it was unclear whether this choice reflected adolescents exploring their identities, simple preference not to answer, or another factor.

Exposure to Violent Pornography—To measure exposure to violent pornography, items from the Social Norms Measure were used (Boeringer et al., 1991). Specifically, three items queried about the number of times students had ever viewed books, magazines, or videos that portrayed women "being forced to engage in sexual acts" and frequency ranges were provided (never, 1–5, 6–10, 11–20, more than 20 times). Responses were aggregated to reflect exposure to any type of violent pornography. This composite variable was dichotomous (yes/no), as the majority of respondents (84.80%, $n = 1082/1276$) denied exposure.

Heavy Episodic Drinking—Heavy episodic drinking was assessed using a single item modified from a question on binge drinking from the Youth Behavioral Risk Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Participants were asked to endorse the number of days they engaged in heavy episodic drinking (i.e., 4+ drinks within a couple of hours for girls) in the past month (I never drank alcohol, 0 days, 1–2 days, 3–9 days, 10–19 days, 20–31 days). Given that the majority of the participants whose data were included in the analyses using this measure (female SMA; 72.31%, $n = 94/130$) reported no heavy drinking, and in keeping with prior research on substance use and TDV among adolescents (e.g., Rostad et al., 2019), responses were dichotomized to reflect any engagement in heavy episodic drinking (yes, no).

Teen Dating Violence—The Conflicts in Adolescent Dating Relationships (CADRI; Wolfe et al., 2001) was used to measure TDV perpetration and victimization. It is comprised of three subscales: threatening, physical, and sexual violence, each of which includes items assessing perpetration and mirrored items for victimization. The threatening subscale includes three items for perpetration (e.g., "I deliberately tried to frighten him/her") and three items for victimization (e.g., "He/she deliberately tried to frighten me"). The physical subscale includes four items for perpetration (e.g., "I threw something at him/her") and four for victimization (e.g., "He/she threw something at me"). The sexual subscale includes four items for perpetration (e.g., "I touched him/her sexually when he/she didn't want me

to") and four for victimization (e.g., "He/she touched me sexually when I didn't want him/her to"). Responses are on a four-point scale (never, seldom, sometimes, and often). The CADRI subscales have undergone previous examinations to confirm their factor structure and assess for measurement invariance (Shorey et al., 2019). Participants' reports of dating conflict victimization and perpetration were assessed separately and were also combined into a single measure of involvement. Given the large percentage of girls (58.87%, n = 491/834) who endorsed no TDV involvement and, in keeping with prior work that reported dichotomized TDV perpetration and victimization (e.g., Rostad et al., 2019), TDV measures were dichotomized (yes, no).

Data Analysis

All analyses were performed in Stata version 16.

Hypothesis 1: Rates of Violent Pornography Exposure and Teen Dating Violence—Frequencies and logistic regression were used to assess the differences in exposure to violent pornography and TDV between heterosexual and female SMA. For TDV, the dataset was limited to girls who dated in the past year (N = 834).

Hypothesis 2: Associations between Violent Pornography Exposure and Teen Dating Violence among Sexual Minority Girls.—For this hypothesis, the dataset was further limited to sexual minority girls who dated in the past year and responded to the heavy drinking question (N = 130); only 1 respondent was excluded due to non-response on the heavy drinking measure. Exact logistic regression was used due to the small sample size and cell distribution (Hirji et al., 1987). Regression analyses were conducted to assess the relations between pornography exposure and TDV, controlling for heavy drinking.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Frequencies of Violent Pornography Exposure and Teen Dating Violence

A minority (15.20%) of girls reported exposure to violent pornography. Female SMA had 2.54 times the odds (95%CI [1.75, 3.69]) of being exposed to violent pornography compared to heterosexual girls (See Table 1).

Nearly half (41.13%) of girls who dated in the past year reported TDV involvement, with over one-quarter (28.42%) reporting perpetration and over one-third (36.57%) reporting victimization. Female SMA had 2.53 times the odds (95%CI[1.72,3.70)]) of being involved in TDV, 2.20 times the odds of being TDV victims (95%CI[1.51,3.21)]), and 2.15 times the odds of perpetrating TDV (95%CI[1.46,3.17)]) compared to heterosexual girls (See Table 1).

Hypothesis 2: Associations between Violent Pornography Exposure and Teen Dating Violence among Sexual Minority Girls

Exposure to violent pornography was not associated with involvement in TDV among female SMA, controlling for episodic heavy drinking. Although not statistically significant, the association between exposure to violent pornography and involvement in TDV trended towards significance (aOR = 2.25, 95%CI [0.88,6.22]). There were no significant

associations between exposure to violent pornography and TDV when separated by victimization and perpetration (victimization: *aOR* = 1.40, 95%CI [0.59,3.44]; perpetration: *aOR* = 1.28, 95%CI [0.53,3.09]).

Discussion

Our findings supported Hypothesis 1, namely that exposure to violent pornography and TDV were more common among sexual minority than heterosexual girls, suggesting these may be important areas for future research and intervention. These findings were consistent with prior work on TDV among female SMA (e.g., Luo et al., 2014) and on female SMA's pornography use from Europe and Canada (Mattebo et al., 2016; Bőthe et al., 2020), contributing to the limited literature on female SMA's pornography use with findings from a U.S. context (Bőthe et al., 2019). Our findings diverged from an earlier Swiss study (Luder et al., 2011), though this may be due to different pornography use measures, sampling techniques, and the different cultural contexts, as other researchers have speculated that discrepancies between findings in varying contexts might reflect differences in sexual liberalism (Bőthe et al., 2019). Although we did not find that exposure to violent pornography was significantly associated with TDV per Hypothesis 2, this may have been due to the limitations of the sample, described below, and understanding this relationship remains important to identify correlates of TDV that could potentially inform intervention development.

Future research is needed to understand the higher rates of TDV and violent pornography exposure among female SMA and ultimately whether there are relevant implications when designing TDV interventions and sexual health education programming. Given that the association between exposure to violent pornography and TDV was in the expected direction, even with the small sample size, additional research exploring these associations with more robust measures and larger samples is warranted to clarify whether SMA's experiences truly differ from those documented in studies of largely heterosexual adolescents (i.e., Rostad et al., 2019). Future studies might benefit from measures of violent pornography that better differentiate between types of violent pornography exposure. For example, researchers might assess whether there is a stronger association between violent pornography that features aggression during sex between females and TDV among female SMA. More robust measures of violent pornography exposure may help to identify which sexual scripts and roles are most "relatable" and influential to female SMA. Research may also be able to determine if this varies by perceived available "scripted" gender role based on sexual orientation. For instance, if female SMA are viewing violent pornography in which males are aggressing against females, are they more likely to affiliate with the male role based on a desire to engage in sexual activity with females? In addition, longitudinal work will enable researchers to assess for directionality regarding exposures to violent pornography and TDV, which could help inform future interventions.

Prior research has suggested that SMA may seek out online sources and pornography in an effort to compensate for the lack of access to accurate information about sexual activities (Nelson, Perry, & Carey, 2019; Nelson, Pantalone, & Carey, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014). Given the relatively higher rates of violent pornography exposure that we found among

female SMA, along with prior research from Canada and Australia suggesting that female SMA have earlier exposure to pornography (Lim et al., 2017; Bőthe et al., 2020), it is critical that sex education curricula be inclusive of younger teens and address pornography consumption. This may be especially important if future research provides evidence of a significant association between violent pornography exposure and TDV among female SMA.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the sample of female SMA was relatively small, limiting generalizability and power. Second, participants were located in a small regional area and demographic data were limited (e.g., race was not permitted to be collected due to anonymity concerns; however, based upon publicly available data, almost a third of students at the schools included in the study were racial or ethnic minorities), which limited our ability to discuss generalizability to other high school samples. Third, the cross-sectional nature of our data restricts us from making inferences about directionality or causation. Finally, it is possible that there are different mechanisms to explain potential associations between pornography exposure and TDV depending on the media that was viewed (i.e., books, magazines, videos) that we were not able to discern, as well as other types of violent pornography that were not captured by the questions used in the survey. Additionally, the violent pornography measure captured pornography that depicted sexual violence against women, but not the apparent gender of the perpetrator(s), which could influence the association between violent pornography exposure and TDV among female SMA.

Conclusion

We found that exposure to violent pornography and TDV were more common among sexual minority than heterosexual girls, but that exposure to violent pornography was not significantly associated with TDV among female SMA. These higher rates are worthy of future study, in particular to better understand reasons for them, how they may impact female SMA's relationships and development, and to better assess how to design appropriate interventions to promote healthy dating and pornography literacy. Additional research is warranted to understand the potential associations between TDV and violent pornography exposure in the context of a larger project of research to identify modifiable predictors of TDV worthy of intervention.

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Table 1

Violent pornography exposure and teen dating violence (TDV) among 14- to 17-year-old female high school students in the Northeast

(*N* = 1276)	Heterosexual (n=1100)	Sexual Minority (n=176)		
	n (%)	n (%)	OR	(95% CI)
Pornography	145 (13.18)	49 (27.84)	2.54	(1.75–3.69)
(*N* = 834*)	Heterosexual (n=703)	Sexual Minority (n=131)		
	n(%)	n(%)	OR	(95% CI)
TDV involvement	264 (37.55)	79 (60.31)	2.53	(1.72–3.70)
TDV (perpetration)	181 (25.75)	56 (42.75)	2.15	(1.46–3.17)
TDV (victimization)	236 (33.57)	69 (52.67)	2.20	(1.51–3.21)

Note. OR=Odds Ratio, CI=Confidence Interval

*limited to those who dated in the past year