

Relationship Satisfaction and Substance Use in First-Year Sexual Minority Students: The Moderating Role of Rejection Sensitivity

Julie Prud'homme, MSc, Debra Torok, BA (Hons), Si Ning Yeo BSocSci (Hons), & Brianna Turner, PhD



University of Victoria

Introduction

- **Sexual minority (SM)** youth report significantly higher rates of **substance use (SU)** and interpersonal vulnerabilities, than their non-SM counterparts (Pachankis et al., 2014; Prud'homme et al., 2019).
- In addition to stress associated with the transition to university, SM first-year undergraduates also face stressors specific to their minority status, which further increases their risk of engaging in SU (Woodford et al., 2014).
- Interpersonal vulnerabilities, such as **rejection sensitivity** and **romantic relationship dissatisfaction**, are also known to precipitate maladaptive SU (Leach & Kranzler, 2013).
- Yet, no known research has examined *if* and *how* rejection sensitivity and romantic relationship satisfaction interact to predict SU in SM first-year undergraduates.

Hypothesis:

SM undergraduates with high rejection sensitivity and poorer romantic relationship satisfaction will report greater substance use than SM undergraduates with low rejection sensitivity and/or greater relationship satisfaction.

Methods

131 self-identified SM, first-year undergraduates participated in this **8-month longitudinal study**.

Baseline measures:

- Sexual Minority Status*
- Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire > 18-item, 6-point scale, measuring rejection anxiety & perceived likelihood of rejection

7x Monthly measures:

- Romantic Relationship Satisfaction
- Substance Use** > Binge Drinking > Drug use (prescription, illicit, marijuana)

* All participants with a non-heterosexual sexual orientation were grouped as SM participants.

**SU behaviors were recoded into dichotomous variables to represent presence or absence of behavior. SU behaviours were then summed to create a continuous SU variable.

Analyses conducted (SPSS v 23):

- Linear Multilevel Modeling
- Simple Slope Analysis

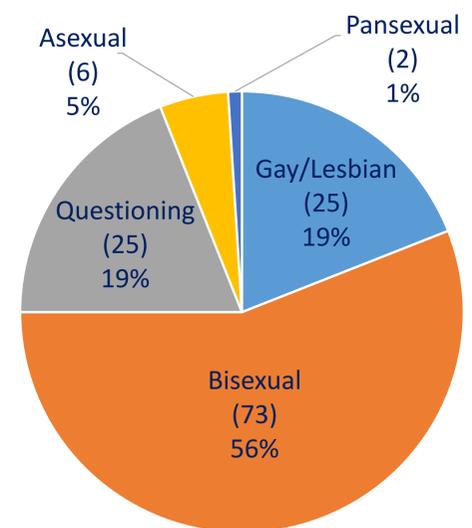
Demographics



Gender Identity

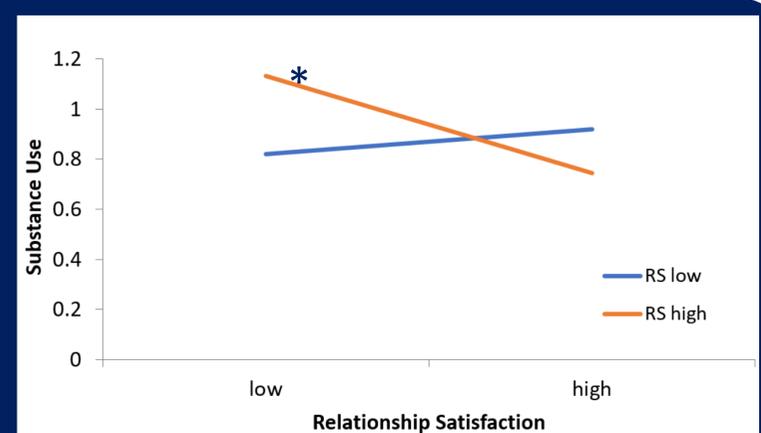
104 cis women (79%)
23 cis men (18%)
3 genderqueer or non-binary (2%)
1 agender (1%)

Sexual Orientation



Results

- **Linear multilevel modeling** revealed that rejection sensitivity (RS) significantly interacted with romantic relationship satisfaction to predict changes in SU in SM undergraduates over their first year of university ($\beta = -.08$, $t(88) = -2.51$, $p = .025$).
- **Simple slope analyses** indicated that relative to those with low rejection sensitivity (RS), SM undergraduates with high rejection sensitivity (RS) engaged in greater SU over their first two semesters when reporting poorer satisfaction with their romantic relationships ($\beta = -.47$, $t(88) = -2.11$, $p = .037$).



Discussion

- In keeping with previous research, poor romantic relationship quality is linked to increased SU among SM individuals (e.g., Cao et al., 2017).
- Our findings also show that having lower rejection sensitivity may minimize the risk of maladaptive SU in SM undergraduates.
- Consequently, interventions aimed at bolstering positive self-schemas, resilience, as well as processing expectations of rejections in the context of romantic relationships may help buffer SU among SM students during the often stressful transition to university.
- However, we ultimately need to see a culture shift in which we move away from heteronormativity and towards greater inclusivity so that people are less likely to have these vulnerabilities (e.g., higher rejection sensitivity) in the first place.

Limitations and Future Considerations

- There exists a cis women and bisexual bias in our data, as most of our participants identified as cis women and/or bisexual. This in turn may be limiting the generalizability of our findings.
- Due to our choice of analyses (i.e., Multilevel Models), we are also unable to be certain of the directionality of these results.
- Accordingly, future research should aim to (a) recruit a more heterogeneous sample and (b) investigate whether SM students who are sensitive to rejection are more at risk for SU because of their poorer romantic relationship satisfaction, or if these students reuse their SU is impacting the quality of their relationship.

References

- Babor, T. F., Higgins-Biddle, J. C., Saunders, J. B., & Monteiro, M. G. (2001). *AUDIT: the alcohol use disorders identification test: guidelines for use in primary health care*. (2nd ed). Geneva, Switzerland: Department of Mental Health and Substance Dependence, World Health Organization. Retrieved from, https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/67205/WHO_MSD_2sequence=1
- Berman, A. H., Bergman, H., Palmstierna, T., & Schlyter, M. (2003). *DUDIT MANUAL: The drug use disorder identification test*. Retrieved from, <https://paihdelinkki.fi/sites/default/files/duditmanual.pdf>
- Cao, H., Zhou, N., Fine, M., Liang, Y., Li, J., & Mills-Koonce, W. R. (2017). Sexual minority stress and same-sex relationship well-being: A meta-analysis of research prior to the U.S. nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79(5), 1258-1277. doi: 10.1111/jomf.12415
- Downey, G., & Feldman, S. I. (1996). Implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 70(6), 1327. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.70.6.1327
- Leach, D., & Kranzler, H. R. (2013). An interpersonal model of addiction relapse. *Addictive Disorders & their Treatment*, 12(4), 183-192. doi:10.1097/ADT.0b013e31826ac408
- Pachankis, J. E., Hatzenbuehler, M. L., & Starks, T. J. (2014). The influence of structural stigma and rejection sensitivity on young sexual minority men's daily tobacco and alcohol use. *Social Science & Medicine*, 103, 67-75. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.10.005
- Prud'homme, J., & Turner, B. J. (2019). *Co-occurrence of health risk behaviours and its stability in first year of university: Are sexual minority students more at risk?* Manuscript in Preparation
- Woodford, M. R., & Kulick, A. (2015). Academic and social integration on campus among sexual minority students: The impacts of psychological and experiential campus climate. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 55(1), 13-24. doi:10.1007/s10464-014-9683-x

For further information, please contact:

Julie Prud'homme
Risky Behaviour Lab
University of Victoria

E-mail: julieprudhomme@uvic.ca