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Victimization and Psychological Wellbeing among Sexual and Gender Minority Emerging Adults: Testing the Moderating Role of Emotional Comfort from Companion Animals



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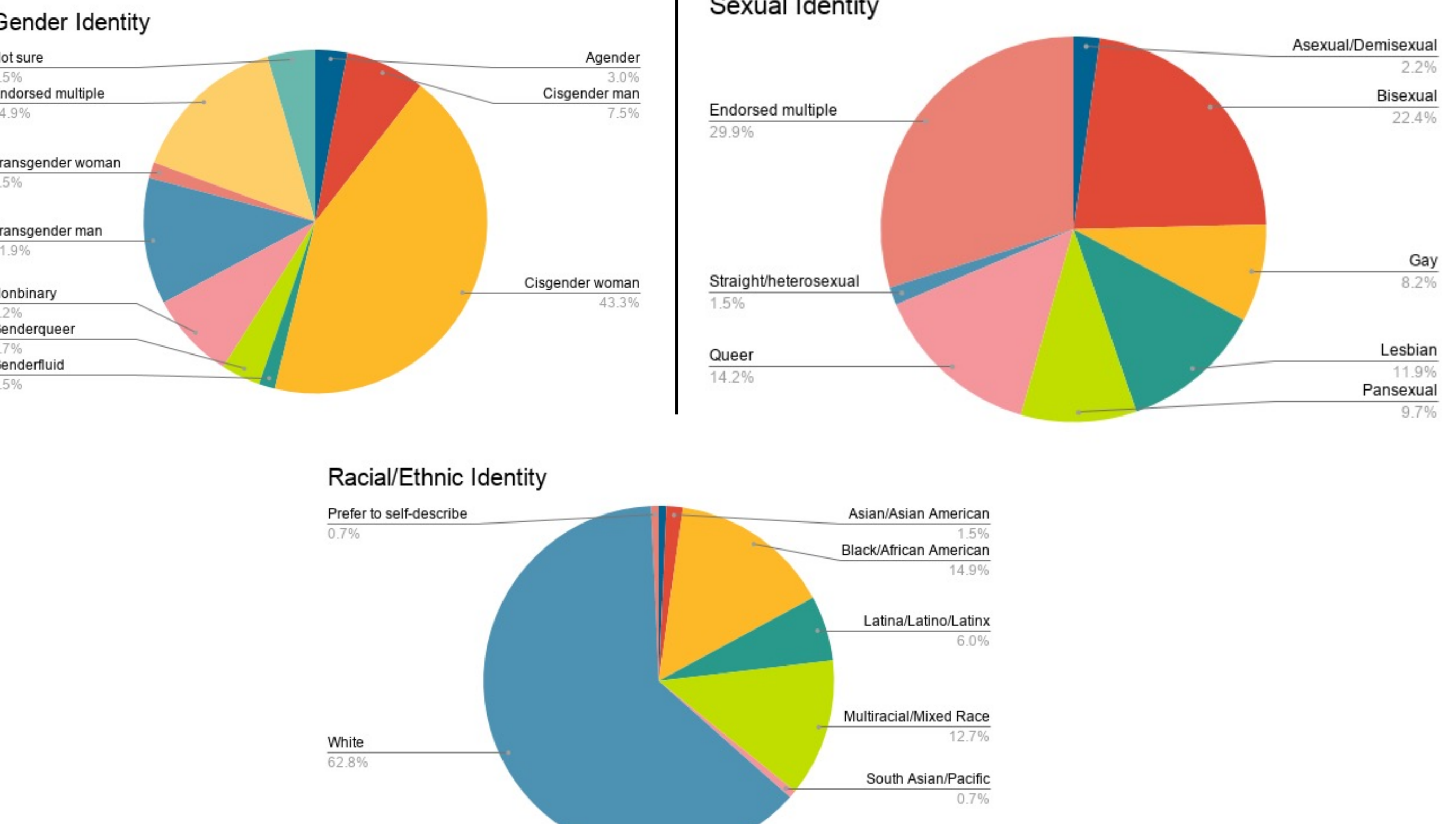
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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

- **LGBTQ+ emerging adults** experience minority stress (increased victimization, rejection, discrimination).¹⁻⁶
- **Gender-based victimization** is a common form of stress experienced by LGBTQ+ youth and linked to negative health outcomes and mental health disparities. Research suggests that such victimization could lead to internalized negative attitudes and have harmful impacts on psychological health and self-esteem.⁶⁻¹⁰
- **The Minority Stress Model** suggests that the link between minority status and psychological stress can, in part, be buffered by protective factors that promote resilience.⁸ **Social support** from family, peers, and community is often a protective factor that buffers stress and is linked to positive outcomes.¹¹⁻¹³
- Young people often turn to their **companion animals** (e.g., dogs, cats) for emotional support, meaning pets could potentially be a buffer to stressors experienced by young people, particularly LGBTQ+ youth who may lack social support from family and peers.¹⁴⁻¹⁸
- The **current study** tests whether, and to what extent, the association between gender-based victimization and psychological wellbeing among LGBTQ+ emerging adults varies as a function of emotional support from companion animals.

METHODS

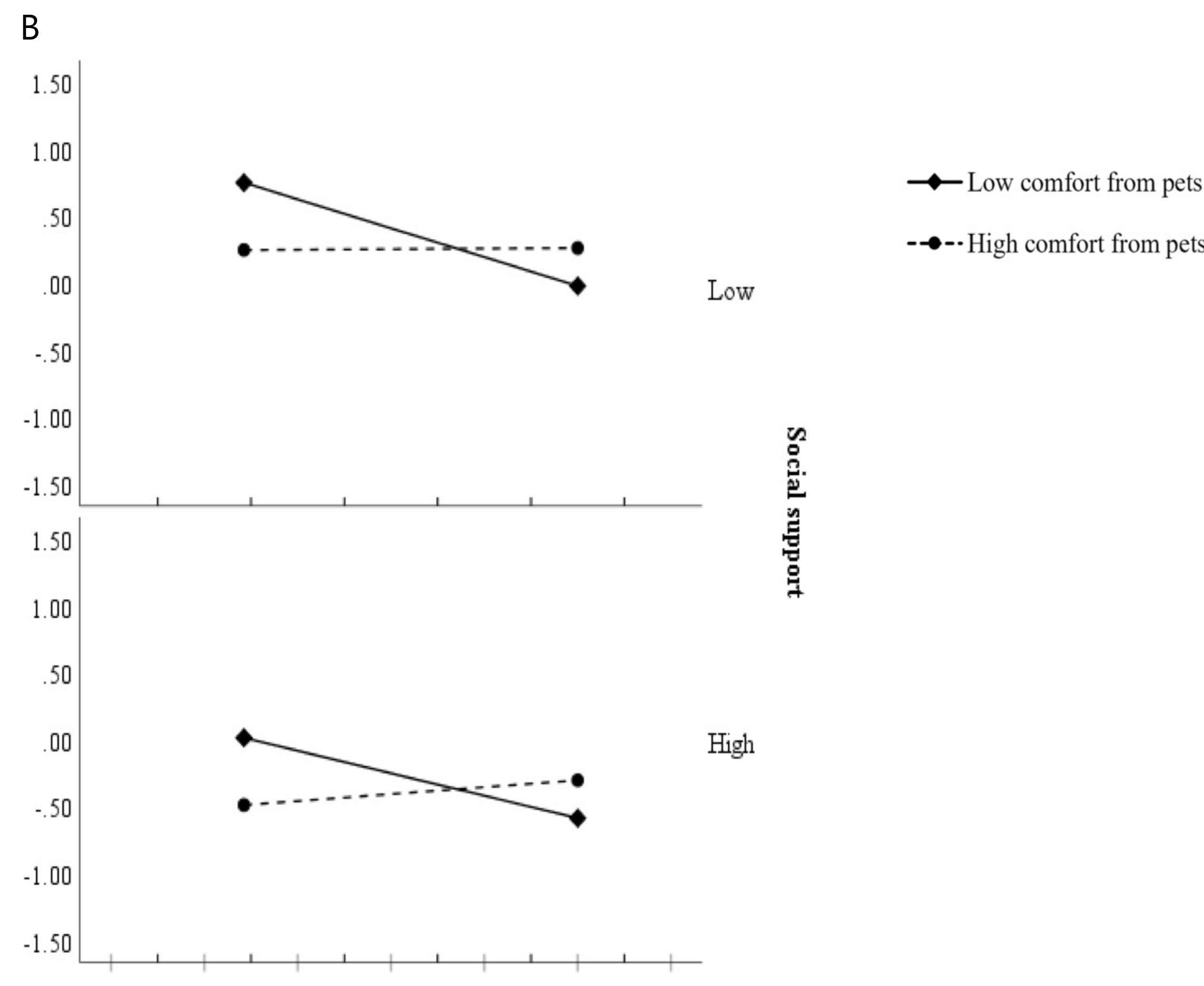
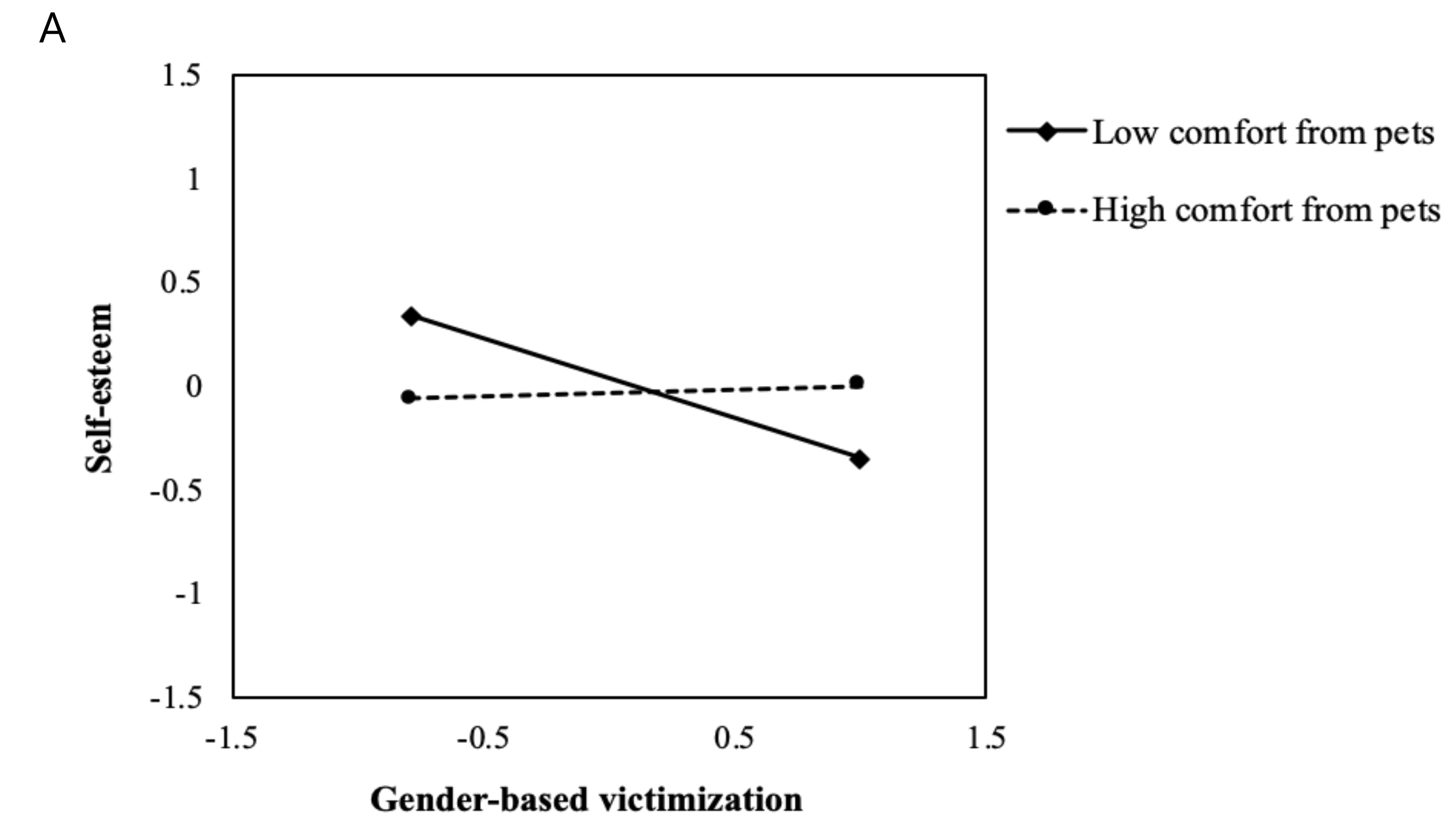
Sample: 134 emerging adults (18-21 year olds; $M_{age} = 19.31$ years, $SD = 1.12$ years).



- Measures:**
- **Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Scale**¹⁹ – gender-based victimization subscale ($\alpha = .68$)
 - **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale**²⁰ – measure of self-esteem ($\alpha = .88$)
 - **Brief Symptom Inventory**²¹ – anxiety ($\alpha = .87$) and depression ($\alpha = .87$) symptoms subscales
 - **Comfort from Companion Animals Scale**²² - measure of comfort derived from pets ($\alpha = .91$)
 - **Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support**²³ – measure of social support ($\alpha = .86$)
 - **Covariates:** Age, race, gender identity(ies), primary caretaker of pet

- Analyses:**
- We conducted **3 simple moderation** analyses to examine whether the relation between gender-based victimization and each mental health variable (depression, anxiety, self-esteem) varied as a function of comfort from companion animals.
 - We then examined **3 multiple moderation** models that included both social support and comfort from companion animals as moderators of the relationship between gender-based victimization and each mental health variable.

Emotional comfort from companion animals may support psychological wellbeing for LGBTQ+ emerging adults who have experienced gender-based victimization.



LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- The study utilized convenience sampling and cross-sectional data.
 - We had to dichotomize gender, sexual, and racial/ethnic identity due to insufficient power to detect small effect sizes.
 - We could not assess the frequency or duration of victimization.
 - It will be important to distinguish who the perpetrator of victimization is in order to determine if gender-based victimization is happening within the family.
- Future Directions for Research:**
- Future studies should examine other outcomes such as behaviors and substance use.
 - It will be important for studies to explore other forms of minority stress and human-animal interaction, such as attachment to pets.

RESULTS

- Simple Moderation Models**
- **Depression:** There were no significant relationships in this model.
 - **Anxiety:** Comfort from companion animals was positively related to anxiety ($p = .04$). Evidence of moderation was not found.
 - **Self-esteem:** The effect of gender-based victimization on self-esteem was moderated by comfort from companion animals ($p = .03$). The relationship between victimization and self-esteem was only negative and significant at low levels of comfort from companion animals ($p = .02$). See Figure A for the simple moderation plot.
- Multiple Moderation Models**
- **Depression:** Social support was significantly related to depression ($p < .001$). Evidence of moderation was not found.
 - **Anxiety:** Comfort from companion animals was positively related to anxiety when social support was held constant ($p = .02$). Evidence of moderation was not found.
 - **Self-esteem:** Social support was positively related to self-esteem ($p < .01$). The effect of gender-based victimization on self-esteem was significantly moderated by comfort from pets ($p = .02$), but not by social support. The relationship between victimization and self-esteem was only significant at low levels of comfort from companion animals at high levels of social support. See Figure B.

DISCUSSION

- We did not find evidence that the association between victimization and anxiety or victimization and depression were moderated by comfort from companion animals.
 - Prior studies have focused on the associations between familial victimization and other constructs of relationships with pets;^{24,25} our study is the first to examine gender-based victimization using comfort from companion animals as a moderator.
- Though social support and self-esteem were positively related, neither were significantly associated with comfort from companion animals.
 - This is inconsistent with some prior literature linking human-animal interaction and self-esteem²⁶ and consistent with other studies that have similarly not found significant relations.²⁷
- Studies have found that human social support is a buffer against the deleterious effects of victimization on self-esteem,^{10,28} and our study adds to literature finding that comfort from companion animals can potentially serve as a protect factor against the effects of gender-based victimization on self-esteem.
- In the multiple moderation model, we found that social support was not a significant moderator. This finding, which is inconsistent with prior studies, may be because we did not assess whether these social relationships were affirming of LGBTQ+ identities.
 - It is important to consider the utility of different forms of social support, such as that gained from pets, particularly among vulnerable populations (e.g., LGBTQ+ youth).

IMPLICATIONS

- Given the harmful effects of gender-based victimization and other stressful circumstances that LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately at risk of experiencing (i.e., employment issues, housing insecurity), this study highlights the importance of exploring how, and for whom, comfort from companion animals and other aspects of HAI may provide protective benefits.

To see the full reference list and acknowledgements, [click here](#) or scan the QR code to the right.



McDonald, S. E., O'Connor, K., Matijczak, A., Murphy, J., Applebaum, J. W., Tomlinson, C. A., Wike, T. L., & Kattari, S. K. (2021). Victimization and psychological wellbeing among sexual and gender minority emerging adults: Testing the moderating role of emotional comfort from companion animals. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713889>