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# Bullying in Five European Countries: Evidence for Bringing Gendered Phenomena Under the Umbrella of ‘Sexual Bullying’ in Research and Practice

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## Abstract

Sexual bullying refers to bullying or harassment that is sexualised, related to sexuality, and/or related to gender expression (Duncan, 1999). Research on sexual bullying is disparate and still developing as a field. This study extends on this research through a mixed-methods analysis of the different forms of sexual bullying and the relationships between them across five European nations. Participants were 253 young people (aged 13–18) from Bulgaria, England, Italy, Latvia and Slovenia. As part of focus groups on sexual bullying, participants individually and anonymously completed a Sexual Bullying Questionnaire (SBQ), comprising closed- and open-ended questions about their experiences of victimisation and bullying their peers. Factor analysis identified five forms of sexual bullying victimisation and two forms of sexual bullying towards peers. The quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that bullying or harassment that is sexualised, related to sexuality, and/or related to gender expression are associated with each other. Further, sexual bullying was found to be common to all five European countries indicating that it is a cross-national issue. The associations between sexualised, sexuality and gender expression bullying or harassment support the use of the term *sexual bullying* to unite these forms of peer victimisation in research and practice. Further, all countries studied require initiatives to address sexual bullying, and the gender and sexual norms that may contribute to it, with tailoring to the country context.

**Keywords** Bullying · Harassment · Sexual bullying · Sexual harassment · Sexuality · Gender expression · Social norms · Cross national · Mixed methods

*Bullying* typically refers to “aggressive behaviour or intentional harm doing that is carried out repeatedly and over time in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an actual or perceived imbalance of power or strength” (Olweus & Limber, 2010, p. 125). Research on bullying began in schools in Norway in the 1970s, increasing after the U.S. Columbine shootings in 1999, and has frequently focused on the psychological characteristics of ‘bullies’ and ‘victims,’ and situational factors that predict bullying (Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Shute et al., 2008). Research on sexual harassment has stemmed from a different tradition and independent literature (Shute et al., 2016). *Sexual harassment* typically refers to sexual acts that are unwanted or unwelcomed

(Brandenburg, 1997). Research in this area also started in the 1970s, but in the U.S. workplace, extending to U.S. schools in the 1990s, and has often focused on the broader cultural and power structures that underpin victimisation (Gruber & Fineran, 2008, 2016; Shute et al., 2008).

Despite different traditions and literatures, bullying and sexual harassment overlap conceptually. Although bullying definitions might emphasise the importance of intention, repetition, duration and a power imbalance, the extent to which these are necessary components of bullying has been questioned (e.g., Carrera et al., 2011; Finkelhor et al., 2016; Volk et al., 2014). Further, although sexual harassment definitions do not explicitly state the role of power, sexual harassment recognises structural and culturally sanctioned power relationships (Gruber & Fineran, 2016), and some sexual harassment definitions include components relating to repetition, duration or harm/impact (Lee et al., 1996; Roscoe et al., 1994; Stein, 1997). Sexual harassment definitions explicitly state the sexualised nature of the behaviour,

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whereas bullying research has been more concerned with the means by which children and young people bully each other (physical, verbal, relational, cyber; Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Shute et al., 2008). Nevertheless, when children and young people complete generic bullying questionnaires, they most likely reflect on both non-sexualised and sexualised forms of bullying in supplying their responses (Shute et al., 2016). Indeed, research shows that bullying is often sexualised in nature, including, for example, teasing girls about their breasts or spreading rumours and disparaging remarks about their sexual reputation (Shute et al., 2008). Accordingly, an enduring remaining difference between bullying and sexual harassment is that the former tends to focus on some form of harm-doing, while the latter tends to focus on how the act is received (i.e., as unwanted or unwelcomed). However, since both bullying and sexual harassment involve a person doing the act and a person receiving the act, in this sense, sexualised bullying and sexual harassment are two sides of the same coin. Given the varied ways in which bullying and sexual harassment overlap, it is not surprising that studies show empirical associations between them (Ashbaugh & Cornell, 2008; Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Pellegrini, 2001; Pepler et al., 2006; Shute et al., 2016).

Research into discriminatory bullying and harassment has also developed over time, but as a separate body of literature from traditional bullying and sexual harassment. Discrimination refers to “harmful actions towards others because of their membership in a particular group” (Fishbein, 1996, p. 7) and can include discrimination relating to sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, weight, or appearance. Of interest here is bullying or harassment relating to sexuality and gender expression. These forms of bullying or harassment can be targeted towards marginalised groups or young people more widely; for example, homophobic epithets are not solely targeted towards gay or lesbian peers (Bucchianeri et al., 2016; Salmon et al., 2018). Many studies have demonstrated that bullying or harassment about sexuality and gender expression are often linked; for example, the California Safe Schools Coalition (2004) found students who were gender non-conforming (considered “not masculine enough” or “not feminine enough” by their peers) were more likely to be targeted about their perceived or actual sexual orientation.

Despite the siloed nature of the literature on bullying, sexual harassment, and discrimination, there are conceptual and/or empirical links between them (Brion-Meisels & Garnett, 2016; Carrera et al., 2011; Rinehart & Espelage, 2016). Continuing to silo these literatures results in a fragmented picture of peer victimisation that potentially fails to capture the interrelated nature of young people’s lived experiences of these phenomena (Brion-Meisels & Garnett, 2016) or acknowledge common underpinning mechanisms. Some researchers have drawn together (i) sexualised bullying or harassment, (ii) bullying or harassment about sexuality, and (iii) bullying or harassment

about gender expression, framing them as different forms of *sexual bullying* (e.g., Duncan, 1999) or *gendered harassment* (e.g., Meyer, 2009), arguing that they are all underpinned by the performance, reinforcement and enforcement of gender and sexuality norms (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2018; Duncan, 1999; Meyer, 2009; Renold, 2002; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). The difference in the use of these two terms is partly a product of political expediency. In the UK, for example, the term *bullying* has “considerable political purchase” (Ringrose, 2008, p. 518) and demands attention and intervention. In the U.S., however, the term *harassment* has been advocated for, as there are legal obligations and procedures associated with sexual and discriminatory harassment (Brion-Meisels & Garnett, 2016; Meyer, 2009). Consistent with our location, we use the term *sexual bullying*.

Research on sexual bullying is disparate and still developing as a field. Some researchers have explored sexual bullying as part of a broader programme of gender or victimisation research. For example, Renold (2005), in their ethnographic sociological study on the gender and sexual relationship cultures of U.K. primary school children, reported a range of verbal and physical sexualised harassment (e.g., being called a “slut” or punched “in the boobs”), homophobic name-calling (e.g., “you gay”), and the exclusion, verbal abuse, ridicule and ritual humiliation of girls and boys who did not cultivate hegemonic masculinity (e.g., not playing sports) or femininity (e.g. looking ‘tarty’; Renold, 2002). As another example, Felix et al. (2009), in their quantitative, psychological study on school violence victimisation, which analysed selected items from the California Healthy Kids Survey for 70,600 Californian students in grades 7, 9 and 11, reported that some students experienced multiple forms of victimisation together, including sexualised harassment, harassment about their looks or the way they talked, or discriminatory harassment about their sexuality or gender. They also found that discriminatory harassment about gender and sexuality were the strongest predictors of all forms of victimisation, indicating that norms around gender and sexuality may play a key role in victimisation in general.

Other researchers, often from educational backgrounds, have focused on sexual bullying specifically. Duncan’s (1999) seminal ethnographic research in four English secondary schools illustrated how sexual bullying was common to school life and comprised a range of interlinked practices. Verbal abuse, for example, could range from sexualised insults (e.g., “slags,” “wankers”) to homophobic epithets (e.g., “homo”) to denigration relating to gender non-conformity (e.g., “hairy tits” or boys appearing “soft” or “wimps”). Duncan argued that these practices enabled young people to police the boundaries of “acceptable” masculinities and femininities and gain social status. Duncan’s research has been influential: as part of a wider programme, the charity, WOMANKIND,

commissioned research on experiences of gender inequality, sexual bullying and gendered violence within five U.K. secondary schools (Maxwell et al., 2010); the interest of a local authority in London led to sexual bullying research in two local secondary schools and further education colleges (Williams, 2013); and a line of research on sexual bullying has been conducted in Australia, although this has focused more on sexualised bullying or harassment, rather than all forms of sexual bullying (Page et al., 2015; Shute et al., 2008, 2016). In the U.S., Meyer's (2008, 2009) research has been influential. Her research has focused on teachers' responses to sexual bullying, rather than young people's experiences of it; however, like Duncan (1999), she argues that the different forms of sexual bullying are linked and that they are underpinned by hegemonic masculinity and femininity and socially constructed gender and sexual binaries (Meyer, 2008).

Although evidence is accumulating to show that the different forms of sexual bullying—sexualised bullying or harassment, bullying or harassment about sexuality, and bullying or harassment about gender expression—are all related, research has not yet statistically identified forms of sexual bullying and the relationships between those forms. Consequently, the first aim of this study was to statistically examine the different forms of sexual bullying and the relationships between them among young people, drawing on qualitative data to illustrate and explain these quantitative findings. We addressed this aim by devising a sexual bullying questionnaire, comprising both closed- and open-ended questions on being targeted for, and enacting, sexual bullying, and inviting a sample of young people to complete it.

Sexual bullying research in a wider range of countries, and cross-national studies, are also lacking. Bullying research, in general, tends to focus on the U.K., U.S. or a single country in Scandinavia (Zych et al., 2015), and sexual bullying research is no exception, with a primary focus on U.K., U.S. or Australian contexts. In addition, whilst national bullying studies produce important country-specific knowledge, they differ in their sampling strategies, participant age, use and definition of the term *bullying*, the types of bullying explored, and how and when the data were collected (Smith et al., 2018), which can impede direct comparisons between studies. Thus, cross-national research on sexual bullying is needed, and arguably, without it, there is a risk of problematising individual countries or cultures, potentially obscuring the extent of the problem. Consequently, the second aim of this study was to extend beyond the U.K., by exploring whether sexual bullying among young people is common to multiple European countries. We addressed this aim by conducting the research in five European countries: Bulgaria, England, Italy, Latvia, and Slovenia.

## Method

### The Addressing Sexual Bullying Across Europe (ASBAE) Project

This study was part of the ASBAE project. Funded by the European Commission's Daphne programme, this two-stage project entailed, firstly, research to explore understandings and experiences of sexual bullying in adolescence (ages 13–18), and young people's and professionals' views on responding to and preventing sexual bullying, and secondly, using these research findings to develop and pilot an intervention to address and prevent sexual bullying among young people. The project was a collaboration between a British university and youth-focused, non-governmental organisations in the five European countries noted above. The project adopted a participatory approach, where a Young People Advisory Group (YPAG) of approximately six young men and women aged 13–18 in each country provided local input and feedback on each stage of the project, for example, by suggesting ideas for, and reviewing, young-people-facing documents (e.g., participant information sheets), research materials, and the intervention resource. The YPAGs' role was advisory; different young people participated in the research and the piloting of the intervention. The research was predominantly qualitative, involving focus groups with young people and professionals, to explore their awareness and understandings of sexual bullying, and views on how to tackle and prevent it; however, each young person attending the focus groups also privately completed a questionnaire comprising closed- and open-ended questions about their sexual bullying experiences. The present study focuses on the findings from this questionnaire, drawing on both the quantitative and qualitative data derived from it.

### Participants

Participants were 253 young people ( $n = 125$  female;  $n = 128$  male;  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.3$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ) across the five countries. They were predominantly White (85.8%; Black = 7.9%; Asian = 4.6%; mixed ethnicity = 1.7%), Christian (71.1%; Muslim = 10.7%; other = 1.7%; no religious affiliation = 16.7%), attracted to different-sex people (95.9%; same-sex = 1.6%; both = 2.4%), single (73.6%), living in an urban area (74.4%) and attending school, training or other education (98.0%; see Table 1 for demographics by country). Partners recruited volunteers via their networks; chiefly, schools and colleges (46.3% of focus groups; youth centres = 26.8%; NGOs = 17.1%; other

**Table 1** Participant Demographics and Recruitment by Country

Characteristic	Bulgaria ( <i>n</i> = 60) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	England ( <i>n</i> = 51) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Italy ( <i>n</i> = 48) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Latvia ( <i>n</i> = 52) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Slovenia ( <i>n</i> = 42) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Age in years	15.28 (1.64)	15.00 (2.04)	15.44 (1.71)	15.31 (1.53)	15.33 (1.12)
	%, <i>n</i> (AR)	%, <i>n</i> (AR)	%, <i>n</i> (AR)	%, <i>n</i> (AR)	%, <i>n</i> (AR)
Nationality <sup>***</sup>					
Country where data collected	86.7, 52 (−3)	68.8, 33 (−4.4)	93.8, 45 (1.4)	90.4, 47 (.7)	100.0, 42 (2.7)
Other	13.3, 8 (1.9)	12.5, 6 (1.4)	4.2, 2 (−1.0)	5.8, 3 (−.6)	.0, 0 (−2.0)
Multiple	.0, 0 (−2.0)	18.8, 9 (5.0)	2.1, 1 (−1.0)	3.8, 2 (−.4)	.0, 0 (−1.6)
Participant Sex					
Female	53.3, 32	47.1, 24	50.0, 24	48.1, 25	47.6, 20
Male	46.7, 28	52.9, 27	50.0, 24	51.9, 27	52.4, 22
Ethnicity <sup>***</sup>					
Asian	.0, 0 (−1.8)	24.4, 11(7.1)	.0, 0 (−1.7)	.0, 0 (−1.8)	.0, 0 (−1.6)
Black	.0, 0 (−2.4)	40.0, 18 (8.8)	2.1, 1 (−1.7)	.0, 0 (−2.4)	.0, 0 (−2.1)
White	100.0, 53 (3.4)	28.9, 13 (−12.2)	97.9, 47 (2.7)	98.1, 51 (2.9)	100.0, 42 (2.9)
Mixed	.0, 0 (−1.1)	6.7, 3 (2.9)	.0, 0 (−1.0)	1.9, 1 (.2)	.0, 0 (−.9)
Religion <sup>***</sup>					
Christian	94.5, 52 (4.4)	20.8, 10 (−8.6)	97.9, 47 (4.6)	75.5, 37 (.8)	61.9, 26 (−1.4)
Muslim	5.5, 3 (−1.4)	47.9, 23, (9.3)	.0, 0 (−2.7)	.0, 0 (−2.7)	.0, 0 (−2.5)
Other	.0, 0 (−1.1)	6.3, 3 (2.8)	.0, 0 (−1.0)	2.0, 1 (.2)	.0, 0 (−1.0)
None	.0, 0 (−3.8)	25.0, 12 (1.8)	2.1, 1 (−3.0)	22.4, 11, (1.2)	38.1, 16 (4.1)
Attraction					
Different sex	96.4, 53	91.8, 45	95.8, 46	98.1, 51	97.6, 41
Same sex	1.8, 1	6.1, 3	.0, 0	.0, 0	.0, 0
Both	1.8, 1	2.0, 1	4.2, 2	1.9, 1	2.4, 1
In a relationship	29.1, 16	20.4, 10	33.3, 16	26.9, 14	21.4, 9
In education or training	95.0, 57	98.0, 50	97.9, 47	100.0, 52	100.0, 42
Location <sup>***</sup>					
Rural	6.9, 4 (−3.7)	.0, 0 (−4.7)	50.0, 24 (4.3)	34.6, 18 (1.7)	43.9, 18 (2.9)
Urban	93.1, 54 (3.7)	100.0, 51 (4.7)	50.0, 24 (−4.3)	65.4, 34 (−1.7)	56.1, 23 (−2.9)
Recruitment <sup>a</sup>					
School/college	77.8, 7	50.0, 4	.0, 0	50.0, 4	50.0, 4
NGO	22.2, 2	50.0, 4	.0, 0	12.5, 1	.0, 0
Youth centre	.0, 0	.0, 0	100.0, 8	37.5, 3	.0, 0
Other <sup>b</sup>	.0, 0	.0, 0	.0, 0	.0, 0	50.0, 4

Some missing data for: Bulgaria (*Ethnicity*: *n* = 7, *Religion*: *n* = 5, *Attraction*: *n* = 5, *In a relationship*: *n* = 5, *Location*: *n* = 2), England (*Nationality*: *n* = 3, *Ethnicity*: *n* = 6, *Religion*: *n* = 3, *Attraction*: *n* = 2, *In a relationship*: *n* = 2), Latvia (*Religion*: *n* = 3), Slovenia (*Location*: *n* = 1). Valid percentages are shown

AR adjusted residual, NGO non-governmental organisation

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup>Percent and *n* for *Recruitment* represents proportion/number of focus groups, rather than participants; inferential statistics not calculated

<sup>b</sup>School and football clubs, volunteer firefighters' brigades

organisations = 9.8%), though this varied by country (see Table 1). To aid recruitment, some Latvian participants were given rubber wrist bracelets advertising the partner organisation or related causes, and participants in one English focus group were given £10 vouchers.

## Sexual Bullying Questionnaire (SBQ)

The purpose of the SBQ was to collect demographic information about the young people attending the focus groups and anonymously gather their experiences of sexual bullying

victimisation (SBQ-V) and sexually bullying their peers (SBQ-B). We did not find a previous questionnaire that covered the varied aspects of sexual bullying that were identified by our partners and YPAGs; collected both quantitative and qualitative data on both victimisation and bullying experiences; and was relatively short. In line with our participatory approach, the SBQ was developed with partners and YPAGs, as well as from the literature (Duncan, 1999; Maxwell & Wharf, 2010; Maxwell et al., 2010; Meyer, 2009).

The SBQ comprised five sections: (1) demographic information, (2) 25 frequency items on participants' sexual bullying victimisation experiences ("How often does a young person or group of young people do these to you...?"), (3) open-ended questions on one of these victimisation experiences, (4) 25 frequency items on participants' experiences of sexually bullying their peers ("How often have you done these to another young person...?"), and (5) open-ended questions on one of these bullying experiences. *Young person* was defined as someone aged 18 or under. The purpose of the 25 frequency items was to collect data on the breadth of participants' experiences and to aid participants in reflecting on their experiences prior to providing a written account of one of them. The frequency items were designed to cover different forms of sexual bullying, degrees of severity, and means of enacting it (physical, verbal, cyber, etc.). The items were answered on a five-point scale of *Never*, *Once*, *Rarely*, *Sometimes* and *Often*. For the open-ended questions that followed, participants chose one frequency item that they had experienced/engaged in and answered four open-ended questions about it: what had happened, who was involved (e.g., number of people, gender, age), what they were "thinking/feeling" at the time and what they thought the other person was "thinking/feeling" at the time. Given the sensitivity of these questions, participants could write about a friend's experience instead, if preferred (recognising, too, that some participants might write about their own experience but attribute it to a friend).

The SBQ structure and wording were designed to facilitate participants' comfort by presenting the potentially least sensitive section first (demographics) and most sensitive section last (engaging in bullying); wording the SBQ-V and SBQ-B similarly; and within the SBQ-V and SBQ-B, broadly grouping the frequency items to present arguably less severe forms of victimisation or bullying first. Throughout the SBQ, we avoided using the term *bullying* as it is difficult to translate across languages (Smith et al., 2002); each young person would have their own understanding of what this meant; and labelling behaviours as 'bullying' might inhibit participants in reporting them, particularly given the sexual nature of the items. For the English-language version of the SBQ, please see Supplement A in the online supplement. Professional native translators in each country translated the SBQ and the translation was checked by the

in-country partner. For the proportion of participants who provided a written account in the SBQ-V or SBQ-B, and whether these were first-person accounts or a friend's experience, please see Supplement B in the online supplement.

## Data Collection

Ethical approval was obtained from Leeds Beckett University. The partner organisations provided young people (and their parents if under 16) with a participant information sheet, inviting them to participate in a project on bullying relating to a young person's gender, appearance, body or attraction to other young people. Written consents were obtained, involving either parental consent and participant assent for young people under 16, or participant consent for young people aged 16–18. A total of 41 focus groups were conducted from June–November 2013 ( $M = 6.2$  participants per focus group,  $SD = 1.6$ ). The aim was to undertake eight focus groups per country, cross-stratifying them by participant sex (male or female), age (13–15 or 16–18) and location (urban or rural); though, adaptations were made depending on the partner organisation's context. The focus groups started with group discussions on expectations and challenges in peer relationships, progressing to participants' awareness and understandings of sexual bullying, followed by completing the SBQ individually, and then group discussions on how to tackle and prevent sexual bullying. Completing the SBQ partway through the focus group helped to minimise boredom and fatigue for participants. The focus groups took place in a private room, typically at the recruitment site, for a mean of 2.5 h ( $SD = 36.5$  min), including breaks and completing the SBQ. During the SBQ segment, tables and chairs were spaced out to enable private participation.

## Data Analysis

### Quantitative Data

The SBQ frequency items were scored from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Often*). Exploratory factor analyses using principal axis factoring and oblique (direct oblimin) rotation were used to identify latent forms of sexual bullying victimisation in the SBQ-V and latent forms of sexual bullying towards peers in the SBQ-B (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Matsunaga, 2010). The factorability of the SBQ-V and SBQ-B was assessed using: the correlation matrix (each item correlated  $\geq .3$  with a least one other item and no items could be correlated  $> .9$ ); Bartlett's test of sphericity (statistically significant); and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (KMO value  $\geq .6$ ). Parallel analysis determined the number of factors to extract (Matsunaga, 2010), which was conducted with 1000 random datasets using O'Connor's (2000) syntax. Factors with eigenvalues greater than the 95<sup>th</sup>

percentile of the distribution of the random data eigenvalues were retained. Please see Supplement B in the online supplement for the results of the factorability checks and parallel analysis. Missing data were handled using listwise deletion. Items with a factor loading of  $\geq .4$  were retained (Matsunaga, 2010). In interpreting factors, items with the largest factor loadings were given greater weight. Outliers (i.e., case values with a  $z$ -score greater than 3.29,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed) were reduced to 3.29 standard deviations from the mean (Field, 2013) and composite mean scores were calculated for the SBQ-V and SBQ-B subscales and totals (totals comprised all 25 items), excluding cases with one or more missing values for the relevant subscale/total. These subscales and totals were then used instead of the factor scores for further analyses. Kendall's tau correlations were used to explore the relationships between the different forms of victimisation and between the different forms of bullying owing to a non-normal distribution and a large number of tied ranks (Field, 2013).

Findings by country were explored, firstly, via exact Pearson  $\chi^2$  analyses to examine the association between ever experiencing victimisation or bullying and country, and experiencing repeat victimisation or bullying and country, with the adjusted standardised residuals (ARs) indicating which cells were responsible for a significant  $\chi^2$  value (Everitt, 1992), and secondly, via a series of ANOVAs to identify statistically significant differences in the forms of victimisation and bullying by country and sex. Participant sex was included as an independent variable, given that gender norms have been suggested to underpin sexual bullying and these norms are likely to affect young women and men differently. A Bonferroni correction was applied to the criterion  $p$ -value for the set of ANOVAs for the SBQ-V and for the SBQ-B to control for familywise error. Robust methods for factorial ANOVA are limited (Field, 2013); to reduce the impact of violations of normality and homogeneity of variance, significant main effects were examined using bootstrapped Bonferroni post-hoc tests, while for significant interactions, the simple effects analysis was conducted using Welch's  $F$ -test and Games-Howell post-hocs; a Bonferroni correction was applied to the  $F$ -tests within each subscale to control for familywise error. SPSS 22/24 was used for all quantitative analyses.

### Qualitative Data

The qualitative data were extensive, comprising the completed SBQ open-ended questions for the participants and the 41 focus group transcripts. The data were translated into English, where required, and imported into NVivo 11 for analysis. We undertook a thematic analysis of these data, using an inductive, semantic approach, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis was grounded in a critical realist perspective, which contends

that, whilst there is a 'real world' that is independent of our own views and standpoints, our understandings of this external world are always constrained by our perceptions, theories and constructions (Maxwell, 2012). Therefore, this position acknowledges an intrinsic subjectivity to all knowledge production. The first two authors coded the data together, enabling discussion of codes and themes; as such, knowledge was co-constructed, bringing together different perspectives on the data, and arguably producing a fuller understanding of it. In undertaking this analysis, we aimed to elucidate the young people's awareness, understandings and experiences of sexual bullying, and their views on how to tackle and prevent it. The full report of the thematic analysis is provided elsewhere (Milnes et al., 2015).

One of the themes, *The Nature of Sexual Bullying*, encapsulated two subthemes: what constituted 'sexual bullying' according to young people (Milnes et al., 2021), and the diverse forms of sexual bullying reported by them, including the varied acts that the young people had experienced or witnessed that they presented as examples of sexual bullying. It is this second subtheme, *Diverse Forms of Sexual Bullying*, that was most relevant to the present study, and thus, we re-read all the extracts coded under this subtheme and considered how they illustrated and explained the quantitative analyses. For ethical reasons, the young people were asked not to share personal experiences of sexual bullying during the focus group discussions, but rather, to share these when individually and anonymously completing the SBQ. Therefore, the examples predominantly come from the participants' written accounts of their victimisation and bullying experiences in the SBQ. However, some participants still discussed personal or vicarious experiences, along with their reflections on these experiences, in the focus groups, and therefore, these examples and the accompanying talk were also included in this subtheme.

## Results

As noted in the Introduction, the first aim of the present study was to statistically examine the different forms of sexual bullying and the relationships between them, drawing on qualitative data to illustrate and explain these quantitative findings. Accordingly, first, we summarise the number of factors (i.e., types of victimisation or bullying their peers) identified in the factor analysis. We then use these factors as an organising framework to describe and illustrate each type of victimisation or bullying in turn. For each factor, this includes the number and nature of the SBQ items loading onto that factor, followed by qualitative extracts from the *Diverse Forms of Sexual Bullying* subtheme (identified during the thematic analysis) to illustrate that type of victimisation or bullying, and where

apposite, to help explain the quantitative findings for that factor (e.g., why a particular item might load onto that factor). Following this process, we report the correlational findings for the relationship between each type of victimisation or bullying peers, again, drawing on the qualitative extracts from the *Diverse Forms of Sexual Bullying* subtheme, where needed, for illustration. When providing qualitative extracts, we have used ‘Q’ to denote extracts from the SBQ and ‘FG’ to denote extracts from the focus group transcripts. All names are pseudonyms.

The second aim of the present study was to extend sexual bullying research to other European countries. Accordingly, we examined the associations between ever experiencing any victimisation or bullying and country as well as between repeated experiences of victimisation or bullying and country. We also examined whether the type of victimisation or bullying differed by country and participant sex.

For clarity, we have divided the study findings into two broad sections – victimisation and bullying peers – with each section following the format outlined above.

## Sexual Bullying Victimisation

### Types of Sexual Bullying Victimisation

Five factors explained 47% of the variance in the 25 sexual bullying victimisation frequency items of the SBQ-V (see Table 2), suggesting five types of sexual bullying victimisation. Each factor/type is discussed in turn below.

The first factor, labelled *Sexual Harassment*, consisted of four SBQ-V items that included sexual jokes, a peer brushing up against them or taking photos up their skirt or down their trousers, or being pressured to send sexual photos or videos of themselves. Accounts of these behaviours were also evident in the qualitative responses, with descriptions

**Table 2** Descriptive Statistics and Exploratory Factor Analysis for the SBQ-V

Item no.	Item summary	% ever	% more than once	Factor					Communality
				1	2	3	4	5	
17	Unwanted sexual jokes	25.10	14.34	<b>.77</b>	.01	-.10	.09	.14	.63
21	Brush up against you	34.40	22.00	<b>.48</b>	.11	.01	-.22	.11	.46
14	Photo up your skirt/down trousers	11.16	3.19	<b>.44</b>	.01	.14	-.12	-.11	.26
15	Pressure you to send sexy photos/videos	13.94	3.98	<b>.43</b>	-.05	.21	-.12	.27	.51
22	Flash bottom/private parts	23.51	10.76	.36	-.03	-.01	-.20	.25	.35
19	Messages – your body/what you’re wearing	20.32	9.96	.33	.14	.19	-.22	-.09	.34
4	Names – way you dress	27.49	13.15	.07	<b>.72</b>	-.14	.04	.03	.50
5	Names – not good looking	43.03	23.11	-.12	<b>.71</b>	.14	-.10	.06	.61
10	Rumours – not good looking	36.36	18.97	-.21	<b>.56</b>	.29	-.05	.10	.50
9	Rumours – way you dress	20.56	8.70	.05	<b>.50</b>	-.04	.05	.02	.25
2	Sexual comments about your body/way you look	45.24	28.18	.21	<b>.44</b>	.11	-.35	-.15	.55
13	Rumours – you’re lesbian/gay/bisexual	15.02	5.53	-.08	-.10	<b>.69</b>	-.15	-.04	.46
12	Rumours – haven’t had sex	15.48	7.94	.06	-.07	<b>.64</b>	.04	.14	.46
8	Names – you’re lesbian/gay/bisexual	21.03	5.16	.00	.23	<b>.60</b>	.10	-.05	.47
7	Names – haven’t had sex	21.28	10.44	.18	.08	<b>.54</b>	.16	.09	.42
24	Touch bottom/private parts	29.48	19.12	.06	.00	.04	<b>-.71</b>	.21	.67
23	Touch breasts/chest/muscles	29.48	17.53	.09	-.02	-.06	<b>-.67</b>	.15	.53
1	Stare at your body	58.33	50.00	.13	.34	.05	-.38	-.14	.38
3	Simulated sexual acts in front of you	21.12	13.55	.13	.19	.06	-.34	.09	.30
20	Messages – having sex with you	14.80	8.00	-.04	-.12	.09	-.25	<b>.75</b>	.68
11	Rumours – you’ve had sex	21.03	14.68	-.03	.10	.06	-.10	<b>.68</b>	.54
25	Make you do something sexual	9.96	5.18	-.06	.02	-.09	-.31	<b>.62</b>	.51
6	Names – you’ve had sex	18.37	10.00	.06	.16	.06	.10	<b>.60</b>	.44
16	Share sexy photos/videos of you	12.10	4.84	.22	-.04	.07	.14	<b>.57</b>	.45
18	Send you pornographic photos/videos	21.91	10.36	.33	.11	.02	.10	.36	.35
Observed eigenvalue				6.33	2.15	1.28	.95	.92	
Percent variance				25.31	8.60	5.13	3.80	3.69	

$N=237$  for factor analysis. See Supplement A in the online supplement for item wording. Table shows factor loadings after rotation. Factor loadings  $\geq .4$  in bold



of young men pressuring young women for sexual photos or videos being particularly common:

[...] When I mentioned that I found him cute he said I should send him pictures of me, so I sent him only my face, but he wanted also naked pictures of my body, and I said ok if he sent them first, but I didn't really mean it. Then he sent me a MMS message of his upper body part without clothes and then demanded me to return pictures of me to him. But I didn't want to, so he was upset and texted me and threatened me and so on. (Slovenian woman, 15, Q)

The second factor, labelled *Appearance-based Victimization*, consisted of five SBQ-V items that included mean names and rumours about the way they were dressed or their attractiveness, or sexual comments about their looks or body. The qualitative responses illustrated the varied ways in which appearance-based victimisation occurred, such as participants being bullied if their clothes or hair were seen as “dirty,” unfashionable or not conforming to gender norms, or if they were seen as “ugly” or as too thin (“stick”) or “fat.” Young men also described being bullied if they did not live up to the tall, masculine ideal. For example, one young man recounted, “...I got bullied at primary school [aged 6–15] a lot. I was called a dwarf and a midget a lot” (Slovenian man, 16, Q). In contrast, young women's appearance-based victimisation was sexualised, with young men “ogling,” commenting on or comparing young women's bodies:

We had sports day in primary school and my friend (female) had really tight sport pants so you could see the ‘line’ of her vagina. One boy spotted that and started to point at it with his finger and make jokes. Also, other boys started to make jokes about it and she felt really not-comfortable and embarrassed. (Slovenian woman, 15, Q)

Young women also recounted how young men particularly commented on their breasts:

Regina: We once had girl [name] in our class and all the boys liked to call her ‘pancake’. And so it went on. But that was earlier, at a younger age...

Solveiga: Anyway, even at our age... You can see it!

Zenta: Maybe not so openly anymore, but still. Or the other way ‘round. If you have big boobs, then they call them a ‘buffer’. (Latvian women 16–18, FG)

A third factor, labelled *Pressure to Be Heterosexually Active*, consisted of four SBQ-V items that included mean names and rumours about being lesbian, gay or bisexual or not having had sex. However, in the focus groups, participants usually spoke in a generalised or hypothetical manner about bullying young people known to be lesbian, gay

or bisexual, and only two open-ended accounts in the SBQ described personal or vicarious experiences. The focus group data that informed the *Diverse Forms of Sexual Bullying* subtheme indicated that instead the terms “gay” or “lesbo” were used to single out and make an example of peers who transgressed socially accepted boundaries, particularly relating to traditional masculinity or femininity. These qualitative data illustrated how the young people used the term “gay” or “lesbo” in three main ways:

Firstly, young men would be called “gay” by other young men as a general insult following incompetence or the transgression of any socially accepted boundary, as these young men explain: “It's just like, whatever you are doing, whatever you have just done, I don't like it, it's unacceptable to me, so I find it gay” (English man 13–15, FG).

Secondly, both young men and women were called “gay” if their appearance, interests or practices contravened notions of traditional masculinity and femininity. For young men, this involved the type or colour of their clothing, an interest in their appearance or fashion, or acting “soft” or “girly”:

I think when people use the word gay here, I think what they mean is, no disrespect to gay people, they mean soft, they mean not respected; that's what we mean by gay, “oh look at the way he dresses, that's gay”, kind of feminine, that's what we mean. Not directly at actually gay people. (English man 16-18, FG)

Similarly, young women were called “lesbo” when looking or acting “boyish”:

Grega: A girl in class, for example, looks a bit like a boy, short hair and not much tits or butt, and she's like, well, a boy. Well, she's often made fun of that she's a lesbo.

Tian: But it's not necessary [that] she's a lesbo, you can just say it so, because she looks like that, right? (Slovenian men 13–15, FG)

Thirdly, young men and women who were not heterosexually active described being “accused” or “suspected” of being gay. One young woman reported, “If you are a girl and you hang around with girls a lot and not, it appears you don't have a lot of male [sexual] relationships, you can, people will call you a lesbian” (English woman 16–18, FG). Another stated, “My brother once got in a fight with one guy [both aged 17] because he said to him that he is gay, because he still didn't have any girlfriend and hadn't had sex so far” (Slovenian woman, 14, Q). This third use of the term “gay” or “lesbian” may also explain why the items that referred to being bullied about not having had sex, and being bullied about being lesbian or gay, all loaded onto this factor.

A fourth factor, labelled *Sexual Assault*, consisted of two SBQ-V items that included participants having their breasts,

chest, muscles, bottom or genitals touched by peers. The qualitative accounts from the SBQ illustrated that this typically involved young women being sexually assaulted by young men at school:

It happens very often, when my class has the range of hours or free periods that my only male classmate starts to go around looking for us and embracing us as an excuse to push us against the wall and start to touch our bottom or other parts. (Italian woman, 16, Q)

Less frequently, participants described attempted or forcible rape, often at parties featuring alcohol or drugs, as one young woman explains: “It was a party. It was fun until the boy that I met there started to force [himself] on me. Probably he thought that I was quite drunk to not recognise what was happening” (Latvian woman, 17, Q). Sometimes, however, participants described young men being sexually assaulted by peers. For example, one young woman recalls that, “At a gym class my [male] schoolmates often punch each other in their genitals” (Slovenian woman, 14, Q). In another example, a young man recounts how, “One girl touched a boy and tried to have an affair with him. [Who was involved?] Girl 15-years-old and boy 12-years-old, and she forced herself on him” (Latvian man, 13, Q).

The fifth factor, labelled bullying for or about *Sexual Experience*, consisted of five SBQ-V items that included being made to do something sexual; unwanted messages via mobile phone or the internet about having sex; sexual photos or videos being shared without permission; and mean names or rumours because they had had sex. Interestingly, the qualitative responses suggested that young women and men experienced each of these five items differently. Below, we illustrate the gendered forms some of these items took.

**Unwanted Messages Via Mobile Phone or the Internet About Having Sex** Young women repeatedly received unwanted messages from young men about having sex. For example, “A certain boy would ask for sex despite the fact he had a girlfriend—constant persistence of messages” (English-Australian woman, 16, Q). However, young men experienced other young men commandeering their mobile phones without their knowledge and then sending messages to young women whilst posing as the phone owner. For example, “Friends took the phone and sent to all the girls messages with sexual content. [Your thoughts/feelings?] This wasn’t ok” (Slovenian man, 16, Q). Indeed, the qualitative responses indicated that young men experienced a wide range of technologically-mediated “pranks,” often involving hacked or fake profiles to embarrass or humiliate them.

**Sexual Photos or Videos Being Shared Without Permission** This could also take gendered forms. For young women, if they sent their boyfriends or potential boyfriends

semi-naked or naked photos, these were sometimes subsequently shared without permission:

During the relationship with her boyfriend, [she] sent via WhatsApp [a] photo of her naked or in her underwear. When they broke up, the guy made public the photos, sending them to friends. In a short time, the whole school was holding this photo! (Italian man, 16, Q)

However, both young men and women could experience sexual photos or videos being taken without their knowledge and then distributed widely:

We had this party at the end of the school year, where one boy got really drunk and others asked him personal questions about the length of his penis and if he would prefer to have sex with boys than with girls and so on, and they recorded him, and then [they] showed it to others later that summer. (Slovenian man, 17, Q)

**Mean Names or Rumours Because They Had Had Sex** For young women, this typically involved denigrating them for having had sex or spreading false rumours to this effect, both of which could serve to damage her sexual reputation. For example, one young woman recalls, “I know one girl [...] many people from her school call her ‘whore’ or ‘slut’...” (Latvian woman, 14, Q). For young men, however, these items could take the form of being mocked for who they had sex with or the type of sex they engaged in:

Researcher: So, people might send 'round videos of boys performing oral sex on a girl [...] What does that mean?  
Asif: It's kind of more disrespect innit, 'cos kind of like the boy is supposed to be the dominant sort, you know, “I take control,” and if he does it, he is seen as “ah look at him.” (English man 16–18, FG)

### Associations Among Types of Sexual Bullying Victimization

There were significant positive small-to-moderate correlations between all subscales of the SBQ-V (see Table 3), indicating that higher frequencies of one type of victimisation was associated with higher frequencies of another type of victimisation. This is illustrated by the *Diverse Forms of Sexual Bullying* subtheme, where a young woman describes experiencing three of the five types of victimisation (sexual assault, appearance-based victimisation, and pressure to be heterosexually active):

Having male friends, they are a bit like “pigs” and they begin to touch me against my will. [...] People say that I have a nice butt. Then many try to unhook my bra and many times they succeed... Finally, they call me lesbian just because with my closest friends we kiss on the mouth. (Romanian woman living in Italy, 13, Q)

**Table 3** Internal Consistency and Correlations for the SBQ-V and SBQ-B

Scale	Subscale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
SBQ-V	1. SH	.72								
	2. APP	.33**	.77							
	3. PHA	.33**	.37**	.74						
	4. SA	.39**	.29**	.17**	.80					
	5. SE	.48**	.32**	.30**	.40**	.80				
	6. Total	.55**	.66**	.46**	.47**	.55**	.88			
SBQ-B	7. SB	.24**	.15**	.13*	.28**	.28**	.29**	.94		
	8. APP	.20**	.30**	.13*	.29**	.24**	.34**	.52**	.80	
	9. Total	.24**	.24**	.15**	.32**	.30**	.36**	.70**	.78**	.92

Cronbach's alphas shown on the diagonal. Kendall's  $\tau$  for the two SA items = .61,  $p < .001$

SH sexual harassment, APP appearance-based, PHA pressure to be heterosexually active, SA sexual assault, SE for/about sexual experience, SB sexualised bullying

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

### Analysis of Sexual Bullying Victimization by Country and Participant Sex

In terms of ever experiencing any sexual bullying victimisation, 84.6% of participants reported ever experiencing at least 1 of the 25 SBQ-V frequency items, varying from 68.3% to 100% across the five countries. There was a significant association between any victimisation and country,  $\chi^2(4) = 20.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $V = .28$ , with higher rates in the Slovenian sample (100.0%,  $AR = 3.0$ ) and lower rates in the Bulgarian sample (68.3%,  $AR = -4.0$ ) than expected statistically (Italy = 87.5%,  $AR = .6$ ; Latvia = 86.5%,  $AR = .4$ ; England = 86.3%,  $AR = .4$ ). However, there was no significant association between the repeated experience of any SBQ-V item (i.e., repeat victimisation) and country (72.7% of participants overall; Slovenia = 83.3%, Italy = 77.1%, England = 74.5%, Latvia = 71.2%, Bulgaria = 61.7%),  $\chi^2(4) = 6.69$ ,  $p = .15$ ,  $V = .15$ .

To explore similarities and differences for each type of sexual bullying victimisation, six  $5 \times 2$  ANOVAs were conducted to examine significant differences in the SBQ-V subscales and total by country and participant sex (adjusted criterion  $p$ -value = .008). There was one significant main effect for country, which was for *Sexual Harassment*,  $F(4, 240) = 7.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\omega^2 = .09$ . Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons indicated that sexual harassment victimisation was more frequent in the Slovenian sample than the other samples, and more frequent in the English and Bulgarian samples than the Italian sample (see Table 4). There were four significant main effects for participant sex, showing that female participants experienced *Sexual Harassment* more frequently than male participants ( $M_{female} = .49$ ,  $SD = .69$ ;  $M_{male} = .25$ ,  $SD = .38$ ),  $F(1, 240) = 15.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\omega^2 = .05$ ;

female participants experienced *Appearance-based Victimization* more frequently than male participants ( $M_{female} = .79$ ,  $SD = .71$ ;  $M_{male} = .43$ ,  $SD = .60$ ),  $F(1, 240) = 20.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\omega^2 = .07$ ; female participants experienced *Sexual Assault* more frequently than male participants ( $M_{female} = .78$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ;  $M_{male} = .39$ ,  $SD = .74$ ),  $F(1, 241) = 12.21$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\omega^2 = .04$ ; and female participants experienced more SBQ-V overall than male participants ( $M_{female} = .56$ ,  $SD = .46$ ;  $M_{male} = .33$ ,  $SD = .35$ ),  $F(1, 228) = 21.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\omega^2 = .08$ . There was one significant country by sex interaction, which was for *Sexual Experience*,  $F(4, 234) = 4.60$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\omega^2 = .05$ . Simple effects analysis showed that being bullied for or about sexual experience was significantly more frequent for female participants than male participants in Italy only, and more frequent for English, Slovenian and Bulgarian male participants than Italian male participants (see Table 4). There were no other statistically significant findings (Please see Supplement B in the online supplement).

### Sexually Bullying Their Peers

#### Types of Sexual Bullying Against Peers

Two factors explained 49% of the variance in the 25 sexual bullying frequency items of the SBQ-B (see Table 5), suggesting two types of sexual bullying towards peers. Each factor/type is discussed in turn below.

The first factor, labelled *Sexualised Bullying*, consisted of 16 SBQ-B items that included a broad range of sexualised acts, from those that were technology-mediated (e.g., pressuring peers for sexual photos or videos, sending unwanted messages about having sex with them), to non-contact (e.g., acting out sexual acts in front of them), to physical contact (e.g., brushing up against a peer). Lower loading items on this factor included derogatory names and rumours about peers who might be gay, lesbian or

**Table 4** Means (Standard Deviations) for Country and Country x Participant Sex for the SBQ-V and SBQ-B

Subscale	Bulgaria			England			Italy			Latvia			Slovenia		
	Overall	Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male
<b>SBQ-V</b>															
SH	.39 (.71)	.45 (.84)	.31 (.52)	.43 (.65)	.61 (.85)	.26 (.32)	.14 (.29)	.21 (.33)	.06 (.22)	.25 (.36)	.31 (.38)	.20 (.34)	.70 (.56)	1.01 (.58)	.41 (.35)
APP	.44 (.62)	.63 (.70)	.24 (.43)	.62 (.69)	.85 (.74)	.42 (.58)	.75 (.79)	1.00 (.80)	.49 (.70)	.55 (.66)	.63 (.66)	.49 (.67)	.72 (.61)	.94 (.54)	.53 (.61)
PHA	.23 (.52)	.21 (.52)	.25 (.53)	.29 (.60)	.37 (.72)	.23 (.47)	.32 (.53)	.29 (.47)	.34 (.59)	.22 (.40)	.26 (.50)	.19 (.27)	.43 (.41)	.58 (.40)	.30 (.39)
SA	.54 (.92)	.45 (.88)	.65 (.96)	.66 (1.05)	.94 (1.16)	.40 (.87)	.78 (1.13)	1.18 (1.37)	.38 (.63)	.48 (.86)	.72 (1.00)	.26 (.66)	.45 (.67)	.68 (.83)	.25 (.40)
SE	.35 (.64)	.16 (.29)	.58 (.84)	.44 (.72)	.38 (.74)	.49 (.72)	.26 (.55)	.48 (.72)	.04 (.12)	.11 (.26)	.14 (.29)	.08 (.22)	.24 (.26)	.26 (.32)	.22 (.20)
Total	.40 (.44)	.41 (.42)	.039 (.48)	.47 (.47)	.62 (.58)	.34 (.32)	.47 (.46)	.67 (.49)	.28 (.34)	.34 (.32)	.42 (.33)	.28 (.29)	.54 (.38)	.74 (.39)	.36 (.27)
<b>SBQ-B</b>															
SB	.23 (.47)	.06 (.14)	.42 (.63)	.12 (.30)	.06 (.13)	.19 (.39)	.13 (.20)	.08 (.07)	.19 (.26)	.09 (.24)	.04 (.06)	.14 (.33)	.10 (.17)	.11 (.16)	.09 (.18)
APP	.55 (.97)	.66 (1.11)	.44 (.78)	.33 (.53)	.30 (.40)	.35 (.65)	.84 (.66)	1.06 (.73)	.63 (.53)	.49 (.67)	.52 (.68)	.45 (.67)	.35 (.43)	.36 (.48)	.34 (.40)
Total	.33 (.55)	.22 (.40)	.47 (.66)	.18 (.34)	.14 (.19)	.24 (.44)	.33 (.27)	.32 (.19)	.35 (.33)	.21 (.29)	.18 (.20)	.24 (.36)	.17 (.20)	.18 (.24)	.16 (.17)

Higher mean scores indicate more frequent victimisation/bullying of peers

SH sexual harassment, APP appearance-based, PHA pressure to be heterosexually active, SA sexual assault, SE for/about sexual experience, SB sexualised bullying

bisexual, and spreading rumours about peers who might not have had sex.

The *Diverse Forms of Sexual Bullying* subtheme illustrated this broad range of sexualised acts. For example, technology-mediated acts could include young men pestering and provoking young women:

A while ago my girlfriend was harassed by her ex on Facebook. He was constantly making fake profiles because she broke up with him. He was writing messages to her, sending her pictures, he would not give up. (Bulgarian man 16-18, FG)

It could also include young men sharing young women’s sexual photos with other young men or on the internet. For example, “One of my friends sent a picture of his girl naked. He [was] boasting how he had her on his demand. And that he can get any girl” (British man, 18, Q). Sometimes, though, young men took and shared sexual photos or videos of each other, as this young man recounts: “Boys recorded some boy (not me) watching porn in the toilet” (English-Caribbean man, 14, Q).

The acts involving physical contact usually included young men touching young women, which was constructed as a “misunderstanding” or a “joke”. For example, one young man recalls, “I touched a girl’s boobs once. It was dark, we were on a bus on a field trip. I thought she would like it but she didn’t” (Croatian man living in Slovenia, 16, Q). Another young man states, “Once as a joke, I touched her ass, making a joke of sexual bad taste: ‘You give me a blowjob?’ ...” (Italian man, 16, Q). However, there were a few examples of young women touching young men, which, while often constructed in a similar way, could have a more conciliatory or apologetic tone. For example, one young woman recounts, “Trying to attract the attention of a guy, I touched him and his abdominal muscles without going through any sexual acts. Perhaps, however, he did not like it” (Italian-Greek woman, 17, Q). Another young woman states, “I did hit a boy’s ass, even though he didn’t want that, but I did have fun with how he jumped aside and so, but after all I apologized to him” (Latvian woman, 16, Q).

The second factor, labelled *Appearance-based Bullying* consisted of five SBQ-B items that included derogatory names and rumours about how a peer dressed or their attractiveness; however, it also included one item on calling a young person mean names for having had sex. The qualitative responses indicated that this appearance-based bullying was often sexualised:

Together with classmates we called one of the classmates names, saying that she's ugly because of her appearance, clothing, and we also said that she will never have a sexual relationship because of her looks, etc. (Latvian woman, 17, Q)

**Table 5** Descriptive Statistics and Exploratory Factor Analysis for the SBQ-B

Item no.	Item summary	% ever	% more than once	Factor		Communality
				1	2	
25	Made YP do something sexual	2.52	1.26	<b>.91</b>	-.26	.72
15	Pressured YP to send sexy photos/videos	6.27	1.67	<b>.89</b>	-.19	.70
14	Photo up YP's skirt/down their trousers	5.44	2.09	<b>.86</b>	-.10	.68
19	Messages – YP's body/what they're wearing	9.21	3.77	<b>.86</b>	-.04	.71
16	Share YP's sexy photos/videos	8.37	5.02	<b>.80</b>	-.07	.60
22	Flashed your bottom/private parts	3.35	2.51	<b>.76</b>	-.14	.51
21	Brushed up against YP	8.37	3.77	<b>.73</b>	.02	.55
24	Touched YP's bottom/private parts	9.62	4.18	<b>.73</b>	.04	.56
3	Simulated sexual acts in front of YP	7.32	2.85	<b>.70</b>	.04	.51
17	Unwanted sexual jokes	12.97	5.86	<b>.67</b>	.13	.54
23	Touched YP's breasts/chest/muscles	14.22	7.11	<b>.66</b>	.10	.50
13	Rumours – YP is lesbian/gay/bisexual	16.67	7.50	<b>.65</b>	.25	.62
18	Sent YP pornographic photos/videos	6.28	2.93	<b>.62</b>	.08	.43
12	Rumours – YP hadn't had sex	5.83	3.75	<b>.51</b>	.26	.43
8	Names – YP is lesbian/gay/bisexual	20.83	11.25	<b>.49</b>	.31	.46
20	Messages – having sex with YP	4.62	1.26	<b>.46</b>	.17	.30
2	Sexual comments on YP's body/way they looked	21.95	13.01	.38	.36	.37
5	Names – YP wasn't good looking	33.75	20.83	-.18	<b>.80</b>	.56
4	Names – way YP dressed	35.84	20.42	-.07	<b>.67</b>	.42
10	Rumours – YP wasn't good looking	29.68	18.30	.01	<b>.66</b>	.45
9	Rumours – way YP dressed	20.74	12.20	.03	<b>.62</b>	.40
6	Names – YP had had sex	16.25	8.33	.21	<b>.48</b>	.36
1	Stared at YP's body	32.36	21.16	.36	.38	.38
7	Names – YP hadn't had sex	9.63	6.28	.27	.35	.27
11	Rumours – YP had had sex	14.23	8.13	.32	.32	.28
	Observed eigenvalue			10.02	2.28	
	Percent variance			40.06	9.10	

*N* = 236 for factor analysis. See Supplement A in the online supplement for item wording. Table shows factor loadings after rotation. Factor loadings  $\geq .4$  in bold

*YP* young person

Further, young people sometimes implied links between a woman's "exposure" of her body and being sexually available:

That's one of the reasons why I don't have Facebook or Twitter, because of guys like that, that just like labelise [sic] you, like even if it's just your picture or anything, they just like think you are easy or whatever. (English woman, 16–18, FG)

In the above extract, the participant highlights how young men make assumptions about a young woman's sexual status based on her appearance. As such, this may explain why the item on mean names about having had sex, and the appearance items, all loaded onto this factor.

The qualitative responses also demonstrated how appearance-based bullying was closely tied to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Young men were

bullied by their peers about their lack of height or body hair and the (assumed) size of their penis, as this young woman explains: "If they [boys] are too annoying you can tell them that they have a small one or something, [...] that they're not some kind of hero but that they're smaller and wimpy and such" (Slovenian woman 13–15, FG). Young women were, instead, subjected to young men objectifying their breasts and bottom:

In middle school, I remember that me and a friend of mine, we usually looked at the breasts of a pretty curvy girl while seeing that she tried not to put them on display and to defend herself. (Italian man, 15, Q)

Young women also experienced other young women evaluating and devaluing their feminine (or "unfeminine") appearance:

[...] one of the girls showed a photo of another classmate who could not come to the party. The photo was taken when there was no cosmetics on the girl's face. Everyone laughed. (Latvian woman, 14, Q)

### Associations Among Types of Sexual Bullying Against Peers

There was a strong significant positive correlation between the two subscales of the SBQ-B (see Table 3), which indicated that engaging in more frequent *Sexualised Bullying* was associated with engaging in more frequent *Appearance-based Bullying*, and vice versa.

### Analysis of Sexually Bullying Peers by Country and Participant Sex

In terms of ever engaging in any sexual bullying against peers, 67.2% of participants reported engaging in at least 1 of the 25 SBQ-B items, varying from 45.5% to 100% across the five countries. There was a significant association between engaging in any sexual bullying against peers and country,  $\chi^2(4) = 38.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $V = .40$ , with higher rates in the Italian sample (100.0%,  $AR = 5.4$ ) and lower rates in the Bulgarian sample (45.5%,  $AR = -3.9$ ) than expected statistically (Latvia = 72.5%,  $AR = .9$ ; Slovenia = 61.9%,  $AR = -.8$ ; England = 57.8%,  $AR = -1.5$ ). There was also a significant association between engaging in any SBQ-B item more than once (i.e., repeat bullying) and country (44.8% of participants overall),  $\chi^2(4) = 26.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $V = .33$ , with higher rates of repeat bullying in the Italian sample (75.0%,  $AR = 4.7$ ) and lower rates in the English sample (23.3%,  $AR = -3.1$ ) than expected statistically (Latvia = 43.1%,  $AR = -.3$ ; Slovenia = 40.5%,  $AR = -.6$ ; Bulgaria = 40.0%,  $AR = -.8$ ).

To explore similarities and differences for each type of sexual bullying against peers, three  $5 \times 2$  ANOVAs were conducted to examine significant differences in the SBQ-B subscales and total by country and participant sex (adjusted criterion  $p$ -value = .017). There was one significant main effect for country, which was for *Appearance-based Bullying*,  $F(4, 230) = 4.14$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\omega^2 = .05$ . Bonferroni post-hoc tests showed more frequent appearance-based bullying in the Italian sample than the English, Latvian and Slovenian samples (see Table 4). There was one significant main effect for participant sex, showing that male participants engaged in *Sexualised Bullying* more frequently than female participants ( $M_{male} = .21$ ,  $SD = .40$ ;  $M_{female} = .07$ ,  $SD = .12$ ),  $F(1, 227) = 13.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\omega^2 = .05$ . There were no other significant findings (Please see Supplement B in the online supplement).

## Discussion

### Varied and Converging Forms of Sexual Bullying

The first study aim was to statistically examine the different forms of sexual bullying and the relationships among them, drawing on qualitative data to illustrate and explain these quantitative findings. Using factor analysis, we identified five types of sexual bullying victimisation (*Sexual Harassment*, *Appearance-based Victimisation*, *Pressure to be Heterosexually Active*, *Sexual Assault*, and *Bullying About or For Sexual Experience*) and two types of sexually bullying peers (*Sexualised Bullying* and *Appearance-based Bullying*). The qualitative data from the *Diverse Forms of Sexual Bullying* subtheme from the thematic analysis (Milnes et al., 2015) illustrated and helped explain these quantitative patterns, providing methodological triangulation. Specifically, these qualitative data brought the factor analyses 'alive,' giving us a nuanced and contextualised understanding of young people's sexual bullying experiences, and crucially, did so in their own words, as well as highlighting qualitative differences between young men and women for individual factor items, and providing explanations for why items loaded onto the same factor or how young people accounted for the sexual bullying practices within that factor.

The different factor structures of the SBQ-V and SBQ-B were surprising. The first SBQ-B factor, *Sexualised Bullying*, was large (16 items) and broad in its scope, encompassing items that, in the SBQ-V, divided into four factors instead: *Sexual Harassment*, *Pressure to be Heterosexually Active*, *Sexual Assault* and *Bullying About or For Sexual Experience*. However, the second SBQ-B factor, *Appearance-based Bullying*, was similar to the SBQ-V *Appearance-based Victimisation* factor. It is possible that, for those who engage in sexual bullying, there is little distinction between the different forms that sexual bullying can take and anyone or anything related to sex or sexuality is targeted. However, as fewer participants reported engaging in sexual bullying compared to being targeted for sexual bullying, there was a smaller sample size for the SBQ-B and this reduced variability in the data for the analysis of the SBQ-B might also explain the pared back factor structure.

Three sets of findings suggested that bullying or harassment that is sexualised, about sexuality or about gender expression are interrelated, offering evidence for uniting these forms of bullying experiences under the overarching umbrella of *sexual bullying*. Firstly, sexualised, sexuality- and/or gender expression-related items sometimes loaded onto the same factor. For example, in the SBQ-V, items relating to sex (e.g., being bullied about not having had sex) and sexuality (e.g., being bullied about being lesbian, gay or bisexual) both loaded onto the *Pressure to*

be *Heterosexually Active* factor. Further, in the SBQ-B, a wide variety of items loaded on the *Sexualised Bullying* factor, from sending unwanted messages to a young person about having sex, to spreading rumours that a young person is lesbian, gay or bisexual, to sending unwanted messages about a young person's body or what they're wearing. Secondly, the qualitative data demonstrated that bullying or harassment relating to sex, sexuality and/or gender expression could occur within the same factor or across factors. For example, in the SBQ-B *Appearance-based Bullying* factor, one of the qualitative extracts highlighted how a young woman's appearance and clothing (i.e., aspects potentially related to her gender expression) were linked by her peers with never having a sexual relationship (i.e., related to her having sex). Further, in the SBQ-V *Pressure to be Heterosexually Active* factor, the qualitative data showed how gender non-conforming young women and men (i.e., aspects related to their gender expression) could be called 'gay', irrespective of their known sexual identity (i.e., their sexuality). Sexualised, sexuality- or gender expression-related aspects were also threaded across factors. For example, extracts relating to gender expression were evident in both the SBQ-B *Appearance-based Bullying* and SBQ-V *Pressure to be Heterosexually Active* factors, while extracts relating to sexuality supported both the SBQ-V *Pressure to be Heterosexually Active* and SBQ-V *Sexual Experience* factors. Thirdly, there were significant positive correlations among the five victimisation subscales and among the two bullying subscales, demonstrating that the forms of sexual bullying victimisation and the forms of sexually bullying peers are associated with each other.

We propose that these varied and converging forms of sexual bullying reflect the presence of intersecting forms of oppression (i.e., sexism, homophobia and transphobia), which, consistent with feminist and queer theorising, are likely to be largely underpinned by notions of traditional heterosexual masculinity and femininity (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2018; Conroy, 2013; Renold, 2002; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). During adolescence, young people develop their social identities and are under increased pressure to maintain gender and sexual norms (Duncan, 1999). Consistent with this, we found that young men more commonly engaged in sexualised bullying, and overall, young women were more commonly victimised; however, both young men and women engaged in appearance-based bullying of peers, targeting those who performed alternative masculinities or femininities in terms of their appearance, interests or practices, and both young women and men experienced pressure themselves to be heterosexual and present as traditionally masculine or feminine.

Specifically, predominant notions of "being a man" include being heterosexual, physical, dominant, sexually virile and emotionally impervious to "pranks" by peers

(Carrera-Fernández et al., 2018; Conroy, 2013). Thus, for young men, engaging in different types of sexual bullying may represent different ways of performing these hegemonic masculinities; for example, by sexually harassing young women, sharing young women's intimate photos with other young men, and engaging in technologically mediated sexual "pranks" to embarrass each other. Through engaging in these forms of sexual bullying, young men not only reinforce their own gender identity "as a man," but also reinforce hegemonic masculinity more widely, by policing and punishing other young men who transgress it (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2018); for example, young men bullied other young men who were sexually submissive. Carrera-Fernández et al. (2018) argue that this othering of young men who transgress hegemonic masculinity further bolsters and legitimises the young man's gender identity as a 'real man'. Similarly, predominant notions of 'being a woman' include being passive, submissive, sexually attractive to men, but sexually active only in highly prescribed circumstances (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2018; Conroy, 2013), and consistent with this, young women were sexually harassed and assaulted by young men, experienced appearance-based victimisation more frequently, and were bullied for having had sex. However, both young men and women may engage in appearance-based bullying, as targeting alternative masculinities and femininities reinforces their gender identities as "real" men or women and serves as a way that they can police each other to present in ways that uphold hegemonic masculinity and femininity.

### Cross-National Evidence for Sexual Bullying

Consistent with our second aim, this was the first cross-national study on sexual bullying, and to our knowledge, the first study on sexual bullying in European countries other than the U.K. We found that sexual bullying was a common feature in all five of the European countries studied. Moreover, all types of sexual bullying occurred in all countries and the nature of the sexual victimisation and bullying experiences were qualitatively similar across countries (e.g., similar descriptions of young men pressuring young women for sexual photos and sharing the photos with other young men).

Importantly, these findings indicate that sexual bullying is not a problem of an individual country or culture, and that similar sexual and gender norms might underpin sexual bullying across the five countries. All countries were situated within the geographic, economic and political regulatory framework of the European Union, which is likely to have increased the similarities across countries (e.g., EU-level concerns regarding gender equality filter down to Member States' national policies). There was some cross-national variation in the specific prevalence rates for sexual bullying

victimisation and sexually bullying peers, and the frequency scores for the types of victimisation and bullying; however, it is important to exercise caution when considering these variations without further research using nationally representative samples. Where borne out, these more nuanced cross-national differences are likely to be influenced by variations in traditional values, educational systems, technological infrastructure, local regulatory frameworks and socio-economic stratification (Livingstone et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2018). For example, our study suggested a greater prevalence of any sexual bullying victimisation, and higher frequencies of sexual harassment victimisation specifically, in the Slovenian sample, and Mugnaioni (2004, as cited in Hrženjak & Humer, 2007) identifies that the key contributors to peer violence in Slovenia are the social and cultural attitudes towards violence and marginalised groups, including women, and growing differences in socio-economic positions.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

This was an exploratory study that provided new insights into sexual bullying using a mixed-methods approach. The main limitations of the study relate to the sample size and sampling. Whilst the sample size was large for qualitative research, it was small for quantitative research, and therefore, the statistical analyses need replicating in larger samples, and ideally, using probability sampling, particularly for comparisons by country. In addition, the participants were quite homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, and an urban location, and owing to YPAG feedback, we did not collect data on gender identity or social class. Thus, stratified random sampling might be advisable, incorporating all these variables, to ensure that diverse social categories are represented in future research, and to explore relationships between sexual bullying and these social categories, and intersections with related axes of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, or transphobia related to gender identity, rather than gender expression).

In the focus group discussions, we found that the young people rarely discussed sexualities outside of the gay/straight binary or genders outside of the woman/man binary. Further research should explicitly explore bullying and harassment relating to non-binary sexualities and genders among young people to more fully understand the diverse forms that sexual bullying is likely to take. Future sexual bullying research could also broaden in geographic scope to additional countries and cultures. Given that most of the sexual bullying research to date has been conducted in Europe and the U.S., it would be instructive to extend this research to countries in the Global South and to those with more collectivist, rather than individualist, cultures.

### Practice Implications

The substantial intersections between bullying that is sexualised, about sexuality, or about gender expression supports existing propositions of uniting these under the overarching umbrella of *sexual bullying*. It also suggests that researchers and practitioners should address these forms of sexual bullying together in order to promote a more comprehensive approach to researching, tackling and preventing bullying among young people. Continuing to “artificially create a barrier between these fields of inquiry [...] effectively limits the resources and approaches available to educators attempting to transform student behaviors in school” (Meyer, 2007, p. 8). Relationships and sex education, and sexual bullying prevention and intervention initiatives, should raise awareness of, and address, the full range of sexual bullying practices young people experience, and engage them in “understanding the constructed nature of gender, making gender boundaries more flexible, and valuing sexual diversity in the classroom” (Carrera et al., 2011, p. 494). Such initiatives may not only help to prevent sexual bullying, but also contribute more broadly to young people developing more equitable and ethical subjectivities. Further, given that sexual bullying is a cross-national issue, multiple countries need to implement relationships and sex education, and sexual bullying prevention and intervention initiatives, that address all forms of sexual bullying, and the sexual and gender norms likely underpinning them, but with appropriate tailoring to the country context.

### Conclusion

Bullying or harassment that is sexualised, about sexuality, or about gender expression intersect and are likely underpinned by young people’s attempts to reinforce their own gender identity and wider hegemonic masculinity and femininity. In addition, sexual bullying, and most likely the sexual and gender norms related to it, are not the problem of an individual country, but rather, common to all five European countries studied. Researchers interested in furthering understanding of bullying or harassment that is sexualised, about sexuality, or about gender expression should consider studying these phenomena holistically, uniting them under the umbrella of *sexual bullying*, and reflect on the potential methodological and political benefits of using both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore them. Policymakers particularly value statistics and narrative accounts (Dommert et al., 2016), and thus, drawing on both could stimulate and drive forward agendas for social change. Pivotal to any future research on sexual bullying, however, is continuing to keep young people at the heart of the enquiry; for as Spears and Kofoed (2013, p. 212) argue, “[young people’s] voice provides a



bridge between what they know and understand, and what researchers need to know and understand, to properly inform policy and practice.”

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**Availability of Data and Materials** The data are not available beyond the research team. The SBQ is available as an Online Supplement.

## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** Ethical approval was obtained from Leeds Beckett University.

**Informed Consent** Written consents were obtained, involving either parental consent and participant assent for young people under 16, or participant consent for young people aged 16–18.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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