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UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY

Health of Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Europe

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Points

- **2011–2014: Love and dating**
- Mental health disparities and bullying
- **2018–: Love and attraction**
- Perceived discrimination
- Why? The HPA axis
- Good news: volunteering, **2021–: new item(s) for sexual orientation; self-efficacy**
- **2021–: new item(s) for birth-registered sex and gender identity**
- Take home messages



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**HEALTH BEHAVIOUR IN
SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN**



ROMANTIC EXPERIENCES: AN OPTIONAL PACKAGE BY THE SEXUAL HEALTH FOCUS GROUP



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THE RATIONALE FOR INVESTIGATING ROMANTIC EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENTS WITHIN HBSC

Love, going out, attraction and identity

Romantic and sexual attraction are essential aspects of human life. There is, however, a lack of appropriate research on adolescent romantic relationships or "romances" [1].

People who are attracted exclusively or partly to same-sex partners are usually identified as Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB). Adolescents belonging to sexual minorities, such as LGB, often experience a high level of psychological distress due to: 1) feeling "different" from other people; 2) pressure to deny or to change their feelings and sexuality; 3) worries about "coming out" to friends, family members and the possible rejection or being ridiculed; 4) difficulty in fitting in and coping at school; 5) bullying and other forms of verbal or physical violence; and 6) feeling unsupported or misunderstood by family members or friends [2]. According to the minority stress hypothesis, these are associated with LGB young people experiencing elevated risk of poor mental and physical health, which may last through adulthood [3, 4].

It is important to notice, however, that LGB are rather denoting identity than attraction. Many people who are attracted to the same sex are not identifying themselves as LGB, or they do not want to be connected to the LGB movement [5]. A key psychological task during adolescence is identity formation [6, 7]. For these reasons, it is more appropriate to ask the gender of the partner(s) the respondent reports being in love with or has been going out ("dating") with. Instead of asking questions on their sexual identity, which may be forming, hence impossible to answer to those adolescents who are still not sure in their orientation. Our new questions provide insight about whether the respondent is attracted to the same sex or to the opposite sex, and in more general, whether if they had ever been in love and/or dated a romantic partner.

Creating a new HBSC Optional Package

In 2011, an overview of the additional questions on sexual health was presented in the 2009/10 HBSC study. Five countries (Finland, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland) administered questions on love or attraction, and the gender of the partner the respondent was (romantically and/or sexually) attracted to. These questions, however, differed in both format and wording and were therefore difficult to internationally compare. Therefore, an Optional Package was developed by Sexual Health Focus Group to explore romantic experiences, with two main aims:

1. To examine the prevalence of romantic experiences in students aged 15 or over.
2. To gain an insight on how opposite and same-sex romantic experiences are associated with adolescent physical and mental health.

A detailed rationale was written and an international mixed-method pilot study was conducted in five countries between 2011 and 2012: France (n=28), Hungary (n=152), Ireland (n=222), Portugal (n=20), and Romania (n=102). The rationale and the results of the pilot study can be downloaded at <http://hbSC.org/romantic-experiences> (your HBSC account is required to access the document).

The results of the pilot study identified questions that proved to be understandable and appropriate for the large majority of the respondents [8].

METHOD

The questions were formulated on the gender of the partner(s) the respondent has ever been in love with or has ever been going out with. The responses, combined with the respondent's gender, can inform us whether the given adolescent is romantically attracted to opposite-sex, same-sex or both sex partners.

THE ROMANTIC EXPERIENCES OPTIONAL PACKAGE

RM1.1 Have you ever been in love with someone?

- Yes, with a girl or girls
- Yes, with a boy or boys
- Yes, with girls and boys*
- No, never

RM1.2 Have you ever been going out with someone?

- Yes, a girl or girls
- Yes, a boy or boys
- Yes, girls and boys*
- No, never

In some countries, the "girls" and "boys" options were omitted from the questionnaire to make the questions more acceptable to respondents, but respondents could still mark "other" (e.g., using both the "girl" and the "boy" option, due to coding practices), also answering by these different items are not included in the present analysis.

Optional Packages were added to the International HBSC study in 2012/14 and administered to those young people in the 15-year-old age category. Question RM1.1 was administered in eight countries/regions to 7172 boys and 7102 girls. Question RM1.2 was administered in six countries, to 4822 boys and to 4787 girls (without the above explained alteration in the response options); these data will be added to the analysis in the close future. Table 1 and 2 presents prevalence data on questions RM1.1 and RM1.2 in absolute numbers and percentages.

Chi-square tests and Cramér's V effect sizes were calculated to identify any difference in patterns of young people's experience of love and dating across countries and regions. To identify whether prevalence data of attraction to the given gender partner(s) were different across regions/countries, cell counts (column proportions) in each row were compared with χ^2 statistics (adjusted for Bonferroni criteria). Due to the large differences in individual cell counts, bootstrapping was applied (number of iterations were set to 1000). Analyses were performed in SPSS 19.0.

Love and dating

THE ROMANTIC EXPERIENCES OPTIONAL PACKAGE 2014

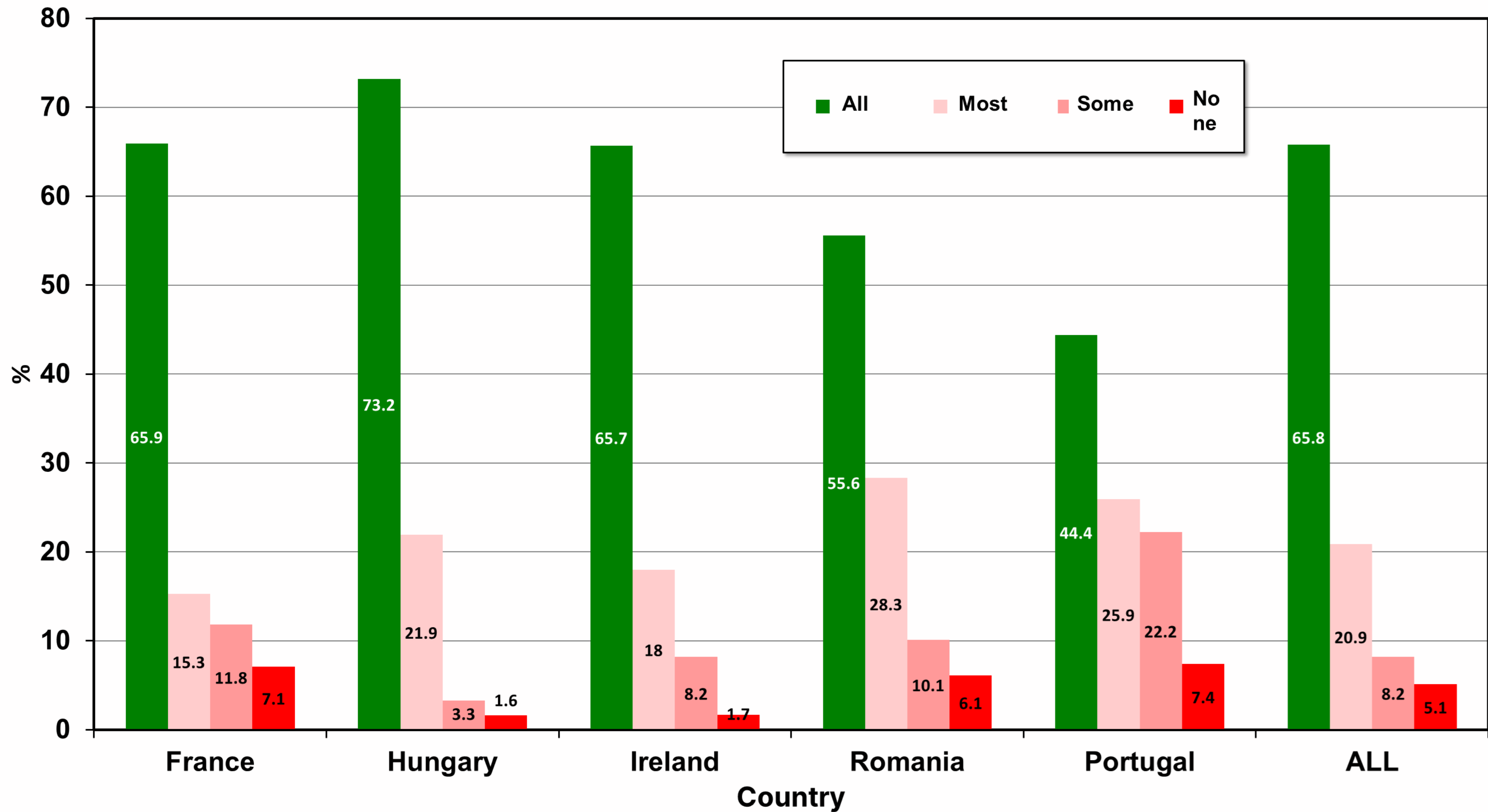
Have you ever been in love with someone?

- Yes, with a girl or girls
- Yes, with a boy or boys
- Yes, with girls and boys*
- No, never

Have you ever been going out with someone?

- Yes, a girl or girls
- Yes, a boy or boys
- Yes, girls and boys*
- No, never

How many of the questions were okay?



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Love and Dating Patterns for Same- and Both-Gender Attracted Adolescents Across Europe

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<https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12394>

Patterns of love

15-year-olds ($N = 13,790$) from Belgium (French), Bulgaria, Switzerland, England, France, Hungary, Iceland, and North Macedonia

	<i>n</i>	%
Ever been in love with opposite gender partner(s)	11,455	83.1
Ever been in love with same-gender partner(s)	241	1.8
Ever been in love with both-gender partners	271	2.0
Never been in love	1,823	13.2

Suicidal thoughts and intention

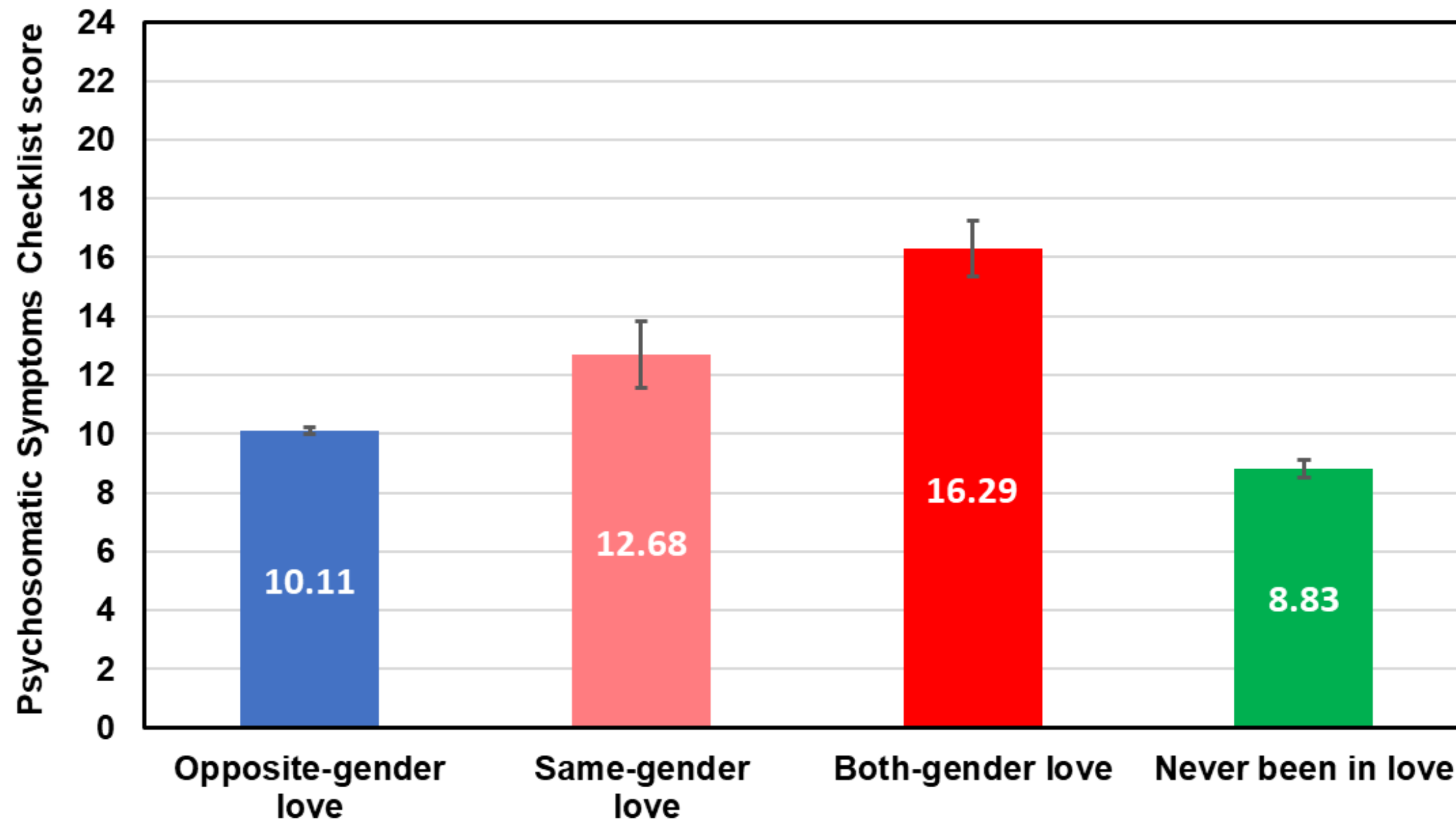
15- to 18-year-olds ($N = 2,580$) from Hungary

	Opposite-gender love	Same-gender love	Both-genders love	Never been in love
Haven't thought of killing myself	71.8%	39.1%	37.2%	81.3%
Have thought of killing myself, but wouldn't do it	25.7%	34.8%	44.2%	14.7%
I would kill myself right now	2.5%	26.1%	18.6%	4.0%

χ^2 (bootstrapped) = 109.52, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .146$ [.092–.230]

Psychosomatic symptoms

$N = 13,790$ young people aged 15 from Belgium (French), Bulgaria, Switzerland, England, France, Hungary, Iceland, and North Macedonia



Bootstrapped $F(3) = 106.238$,
 $p < .001$, $f = 0.15$

Post hoc comparisons:
significant differences
between all groups ($p < .001$)

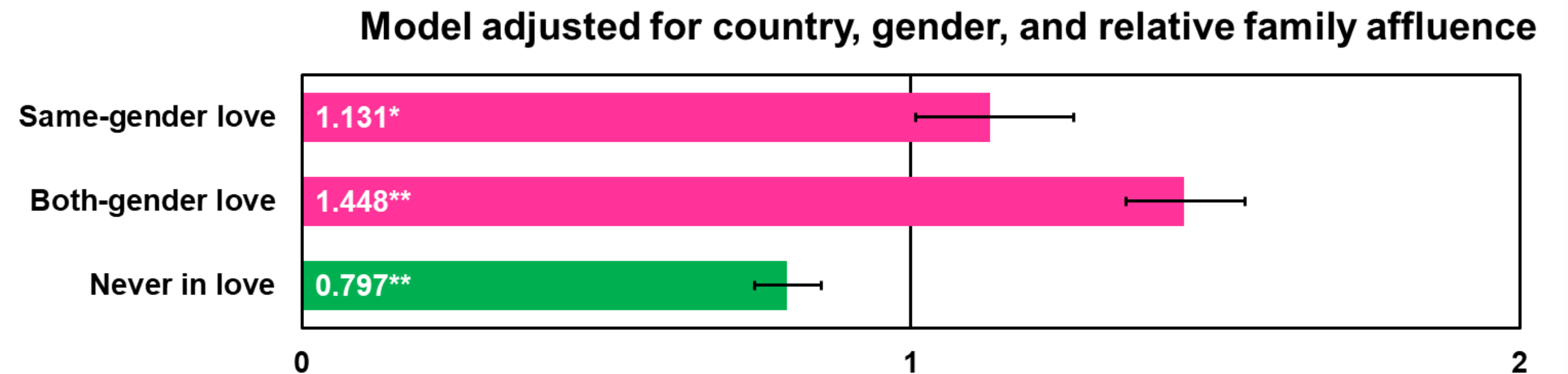
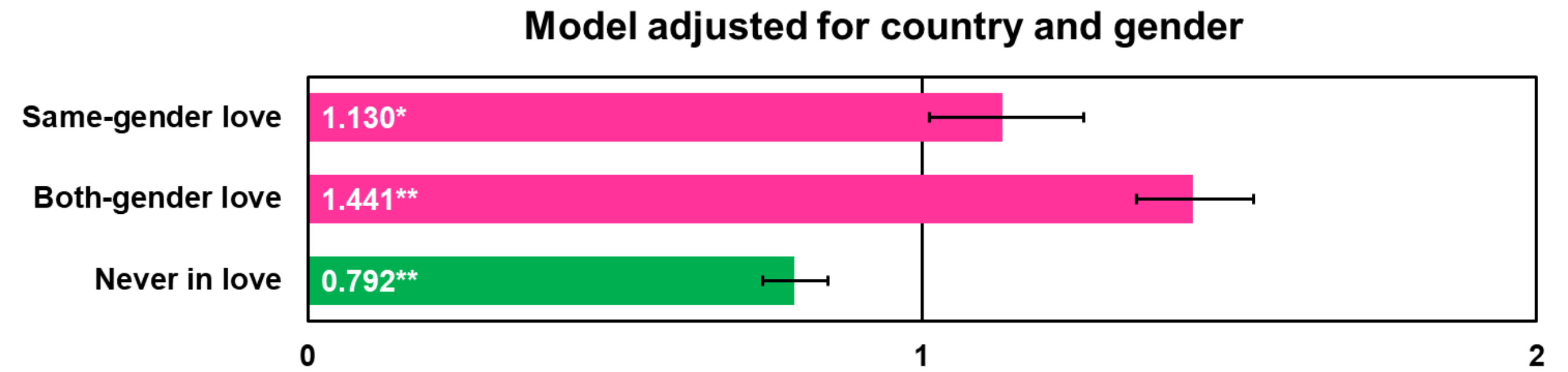
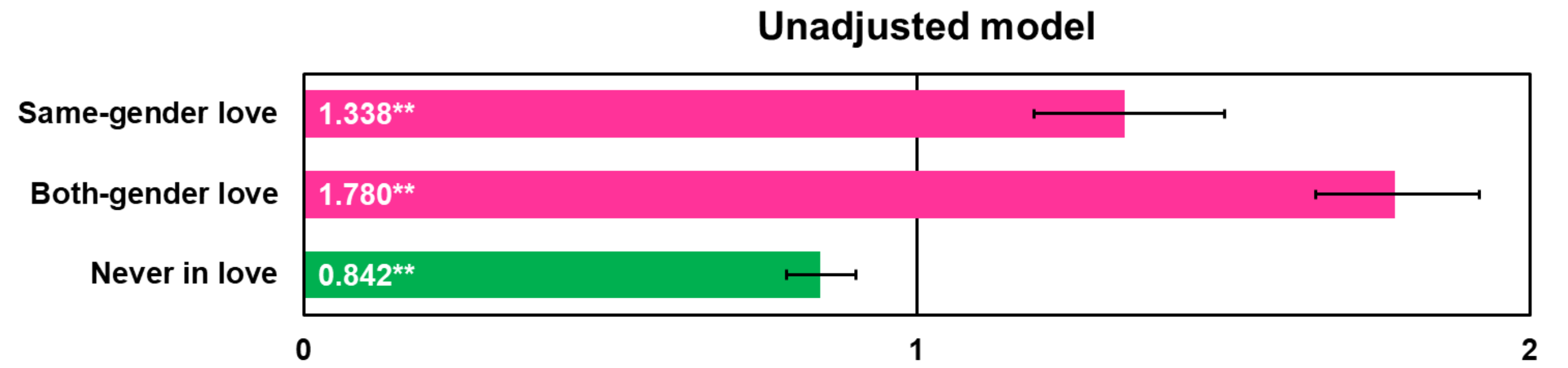
Error bars indicate standard
error

Multiple health complaints

Odds Ratio of those in love with opposite-gender partners = 1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals



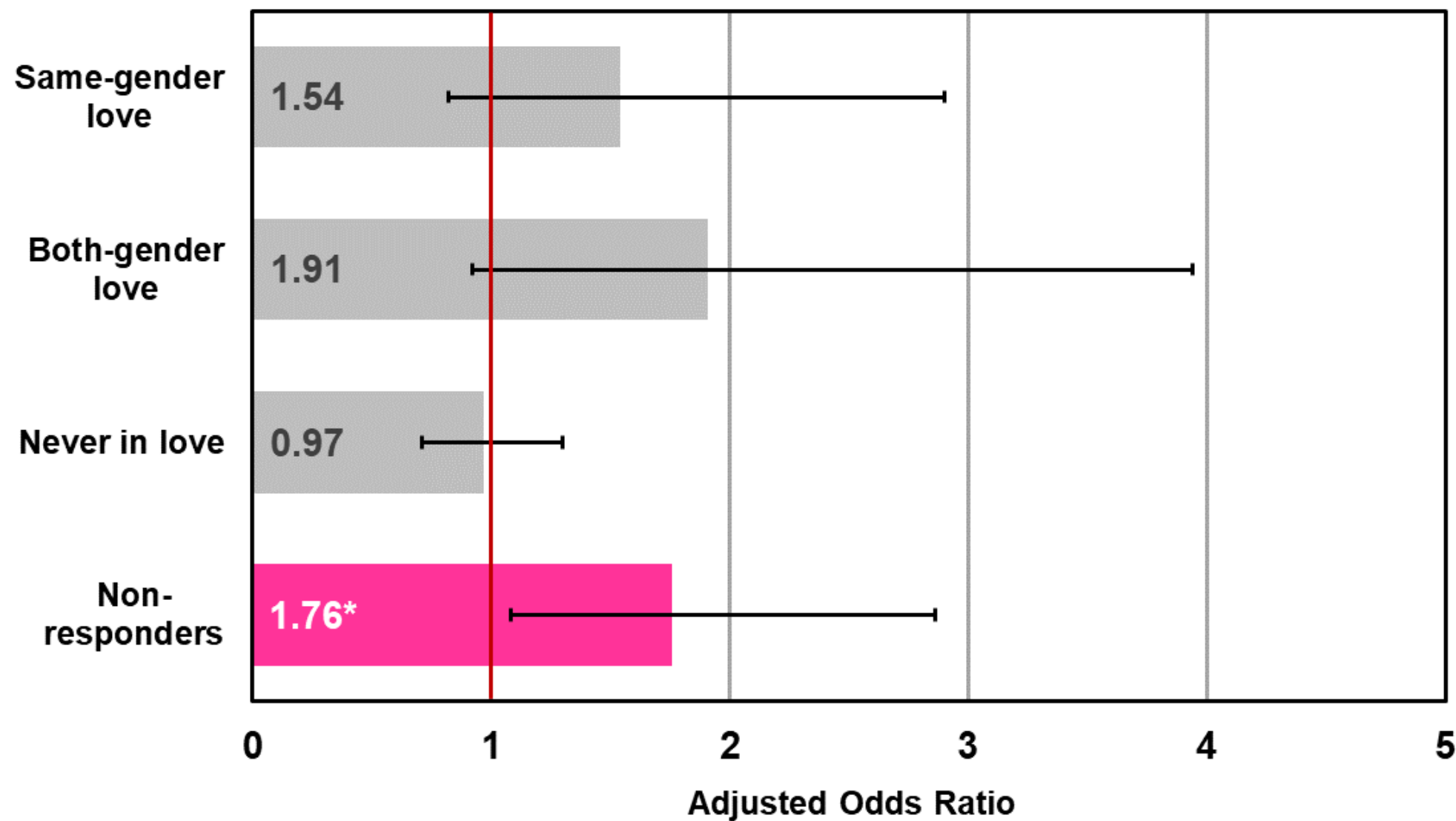
Self-Reported Health and Patterns of Romantic Love in Adolescents from Eight European Countries and Regions

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Bullying perpetration

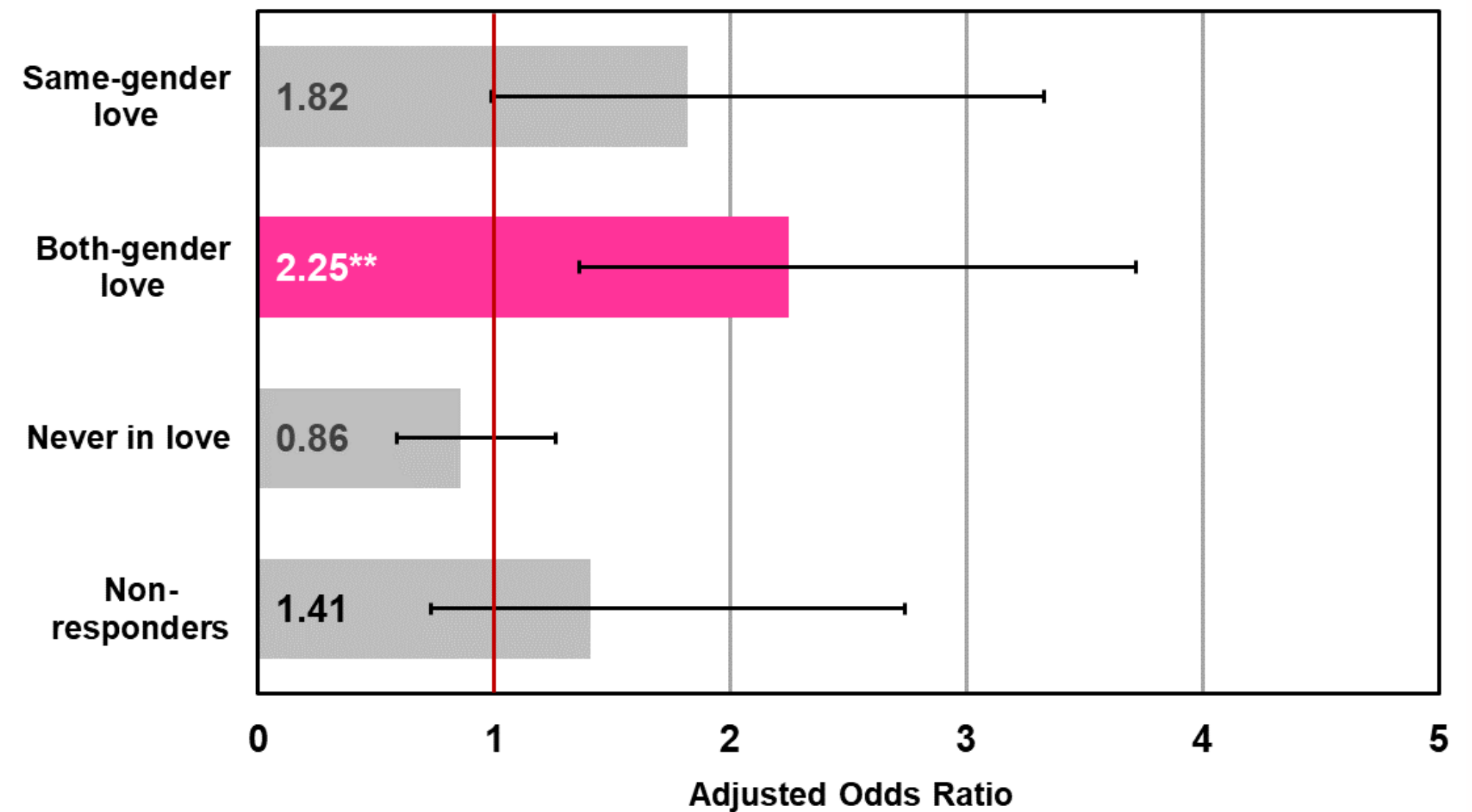
Bullying perpetration, boys ($n = 6,689$)

AOR Opposite-gender love = 1



Bullying perpetration, girls ($n = 6,825$)

AOR Opposite-gender love = 1



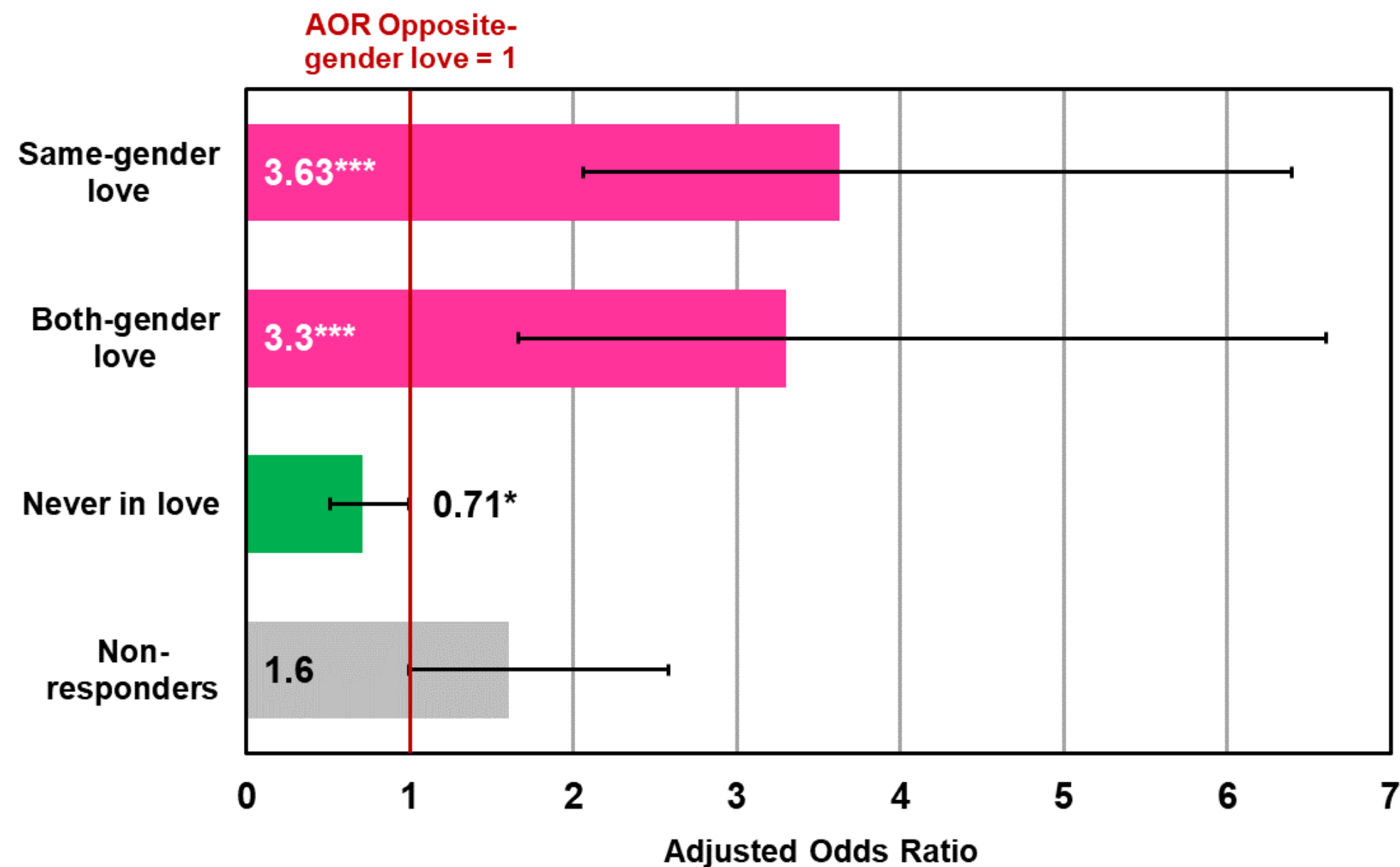
Adjusted Odds Ratio of those in love with opposite-gender partners = 1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

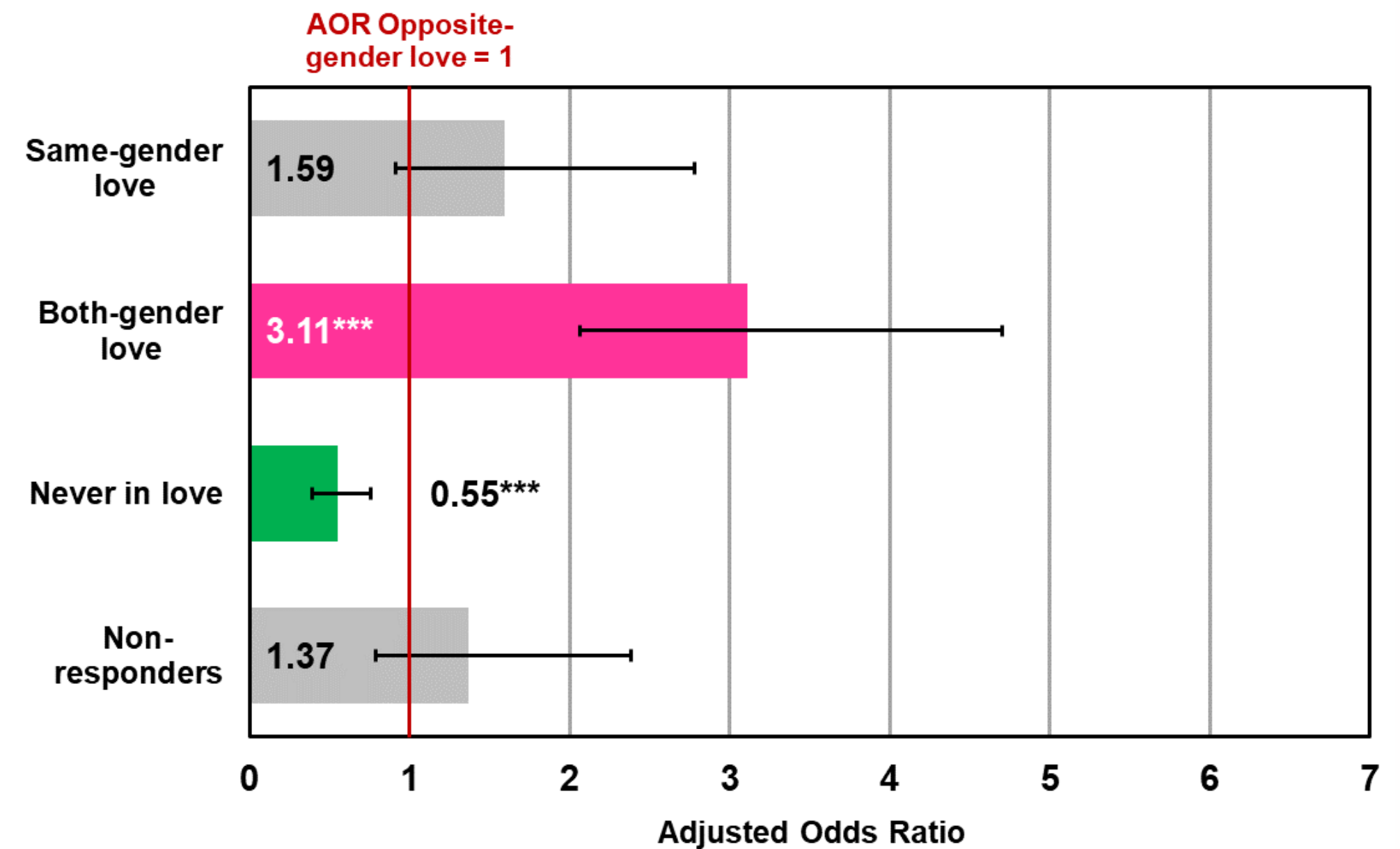
Controlled for country, relative family affluence and bullying victimisation
Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals

Bullying victimisation

Bullying victimisation, boys (*n* = 6,689)



Bullying victimisation, girls (*n* = 6,825)



Adjusted Odds Ratio of those in love with opposite-gender partners = 1

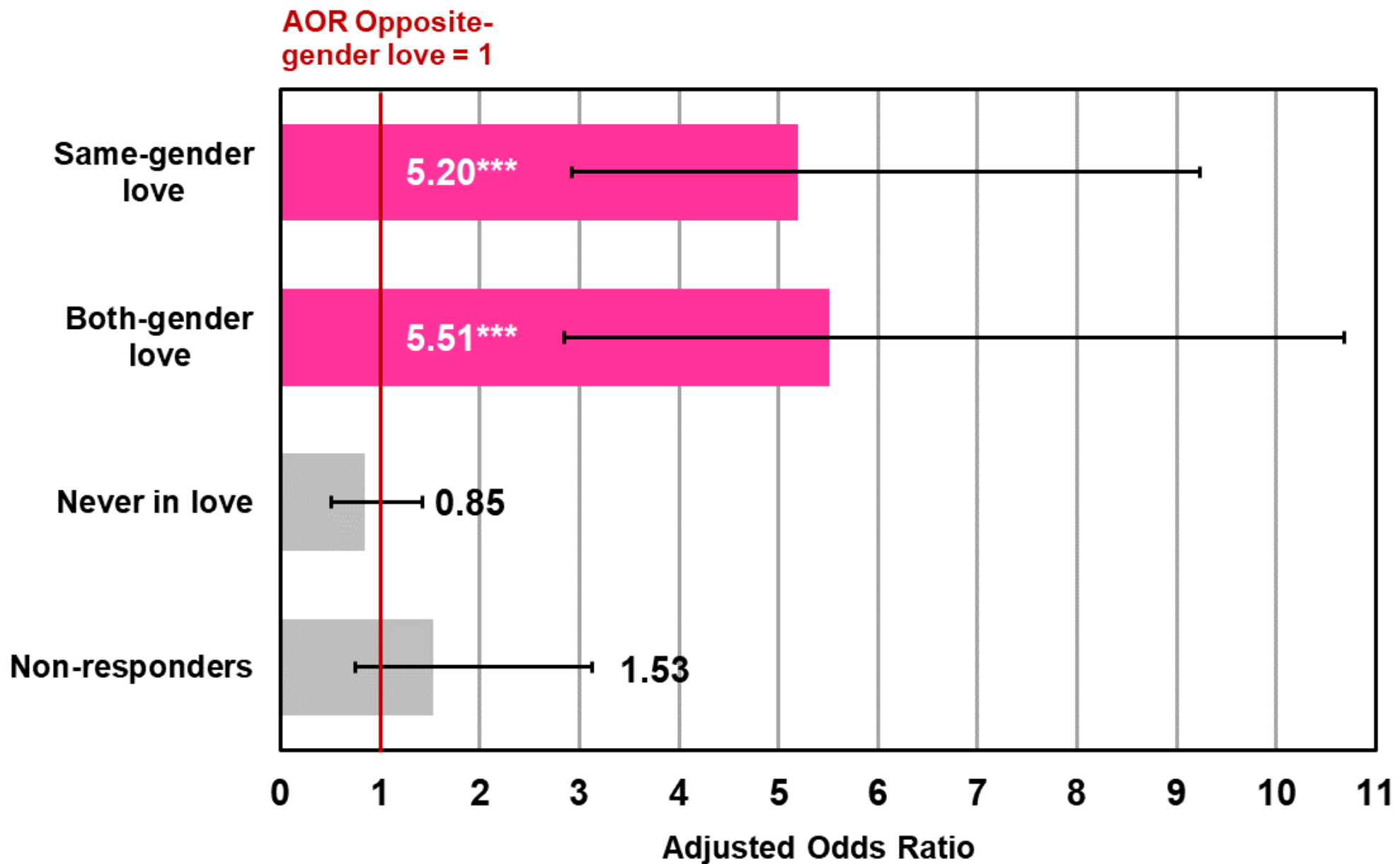
p* < .05, *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001

Controlled for country, relative family affluence and bullying perpetration

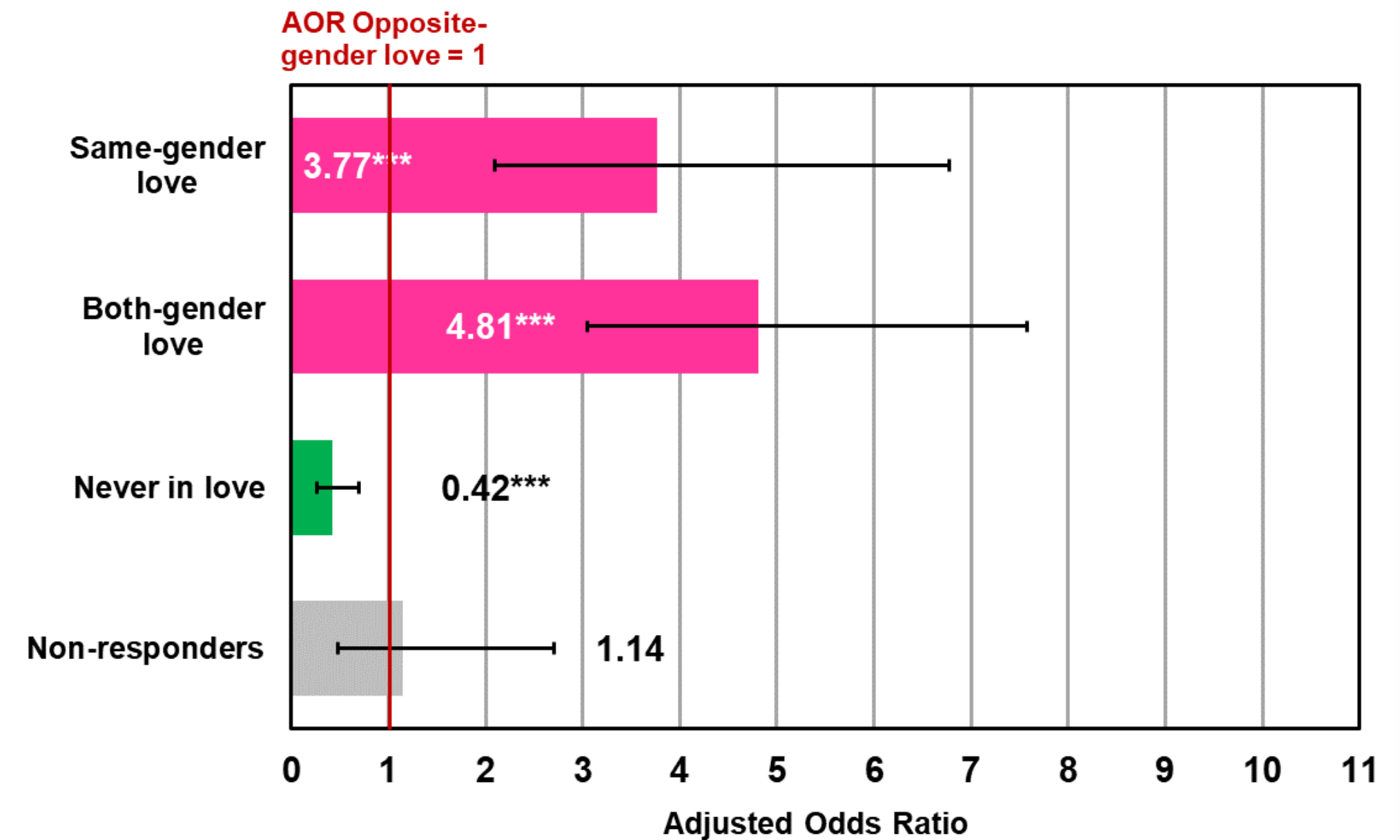
Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals

Cyberbullying victimisation

Cyberbullying victimisation, boys (n = 6,689)



Bullying victimisation, girls (n = 6,825)









Adjusted Odds Ratio of those in love with opposite-gender partners = 1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Controlled for country and relative family affluence
Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals



Romantic love and involvement in bullying and cyberbullying in 15-year-old adolescents from eight European countries and regions

Alina Cosma^{a,b} , András Költő^{b,c} , Honor Young^d , Einar Thorsteinsson^e , Emmanuelle Godeau^{f,g} , Elizabeth Saewyc^h  and Saoirse Nic Gabhainn^c 

Students' feedback

“Attracted: yes, love: no.”

(Girl from Ireland)

“I would like to change the word ‘Love’ to ‘Like’.”

(Girl from Hungary)

“I was confused because these days you can be ‘with’ someone yet not dating them or going out.”

(Girl from Ireland)

“It is over but I love her.”

(Boy from Ireland)

Love and attraction

THE ROMANTIC EXPERIENCES OPTIONAL PACKAGE 2018

Are you attracted to...

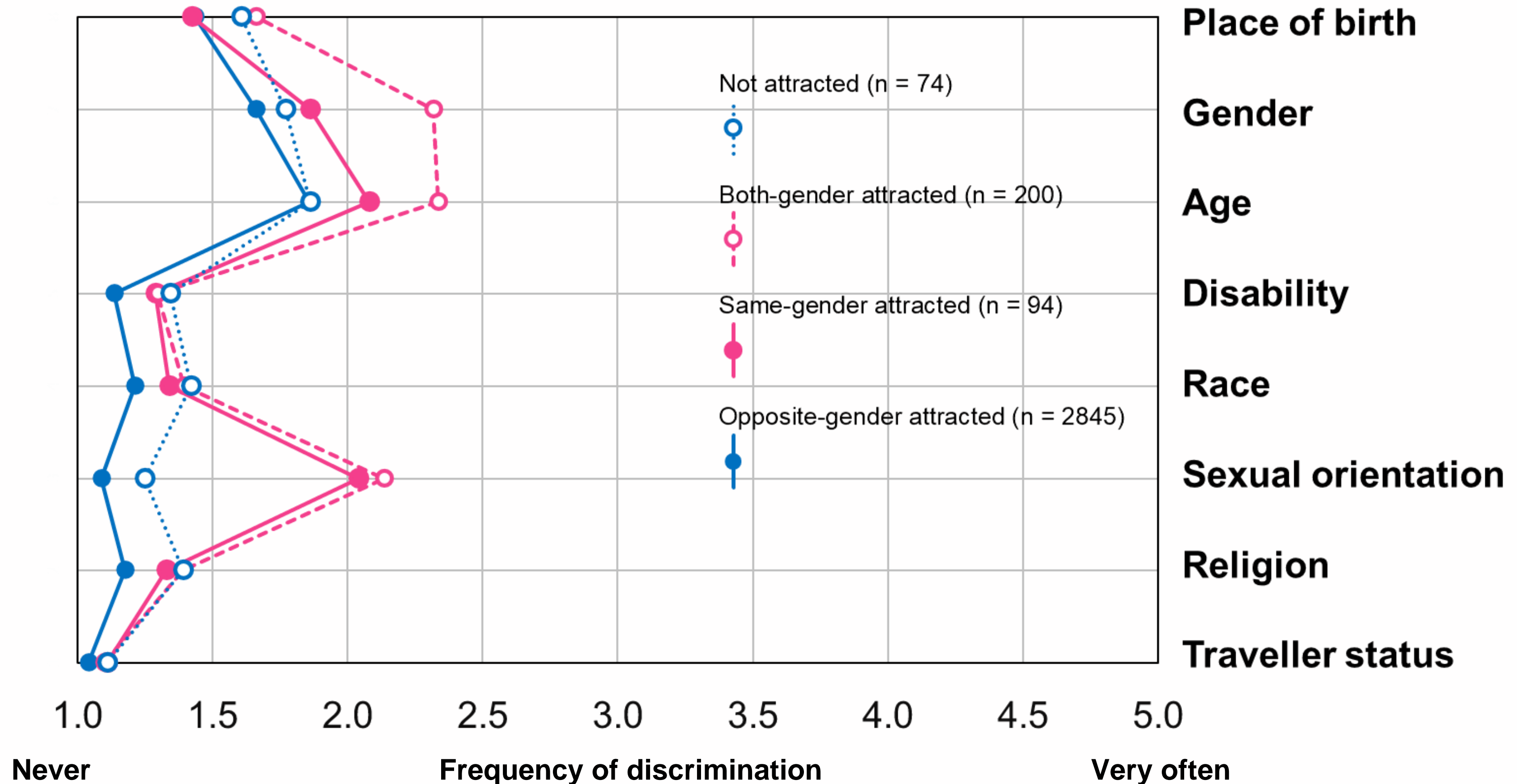
- Girls
- Boys
- Both girls and boys
- I am not attracted yet to anyone

Have you ever been in love with...

- A girl or girls
- A boy or boys
- Both girls and boys
- I have never been in love

Perceived discrimination

N = 3,213 young people aged 15–17 from Ireland



Brief Report



Perceived Discrimination Among Adolescents in Ireland

András Költő, PhD¹ , Aoife Gavin, MSc¹, Elena Vaughan, PhD¹,
Michal Molcho, PhD¹, Colette Kelly, PhD¹,
and Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, PhD¹ 

Health Education & Behavior

1–6

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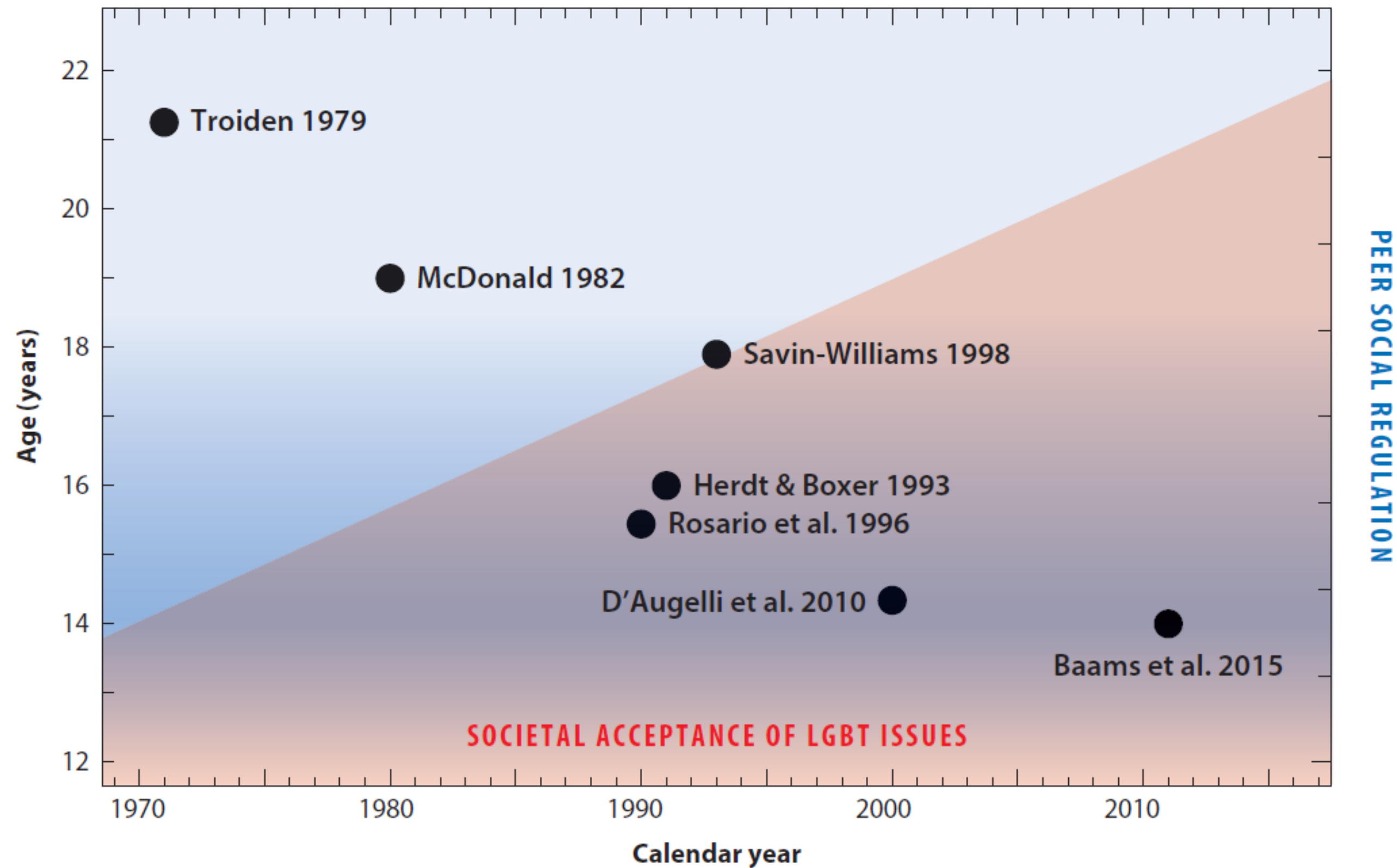
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10901981221133301>



<https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2022/1124/1338060-halo-effect-first-impressions-discrimination-psychology/>

Why?

Coming out and adolescent social regulation are conflicting (Russell & Fish, 2016)



Minority stress

(Meyer, 1995, 2003)

Distal

External stressors

Prejudice, discrimination, direct aggression (bullying) and victimisation

Anticipating exclusion, harassment and aggression

Constant alertness

Embracing negative societal/peer attitudes

Internalised homophobia

Proximal



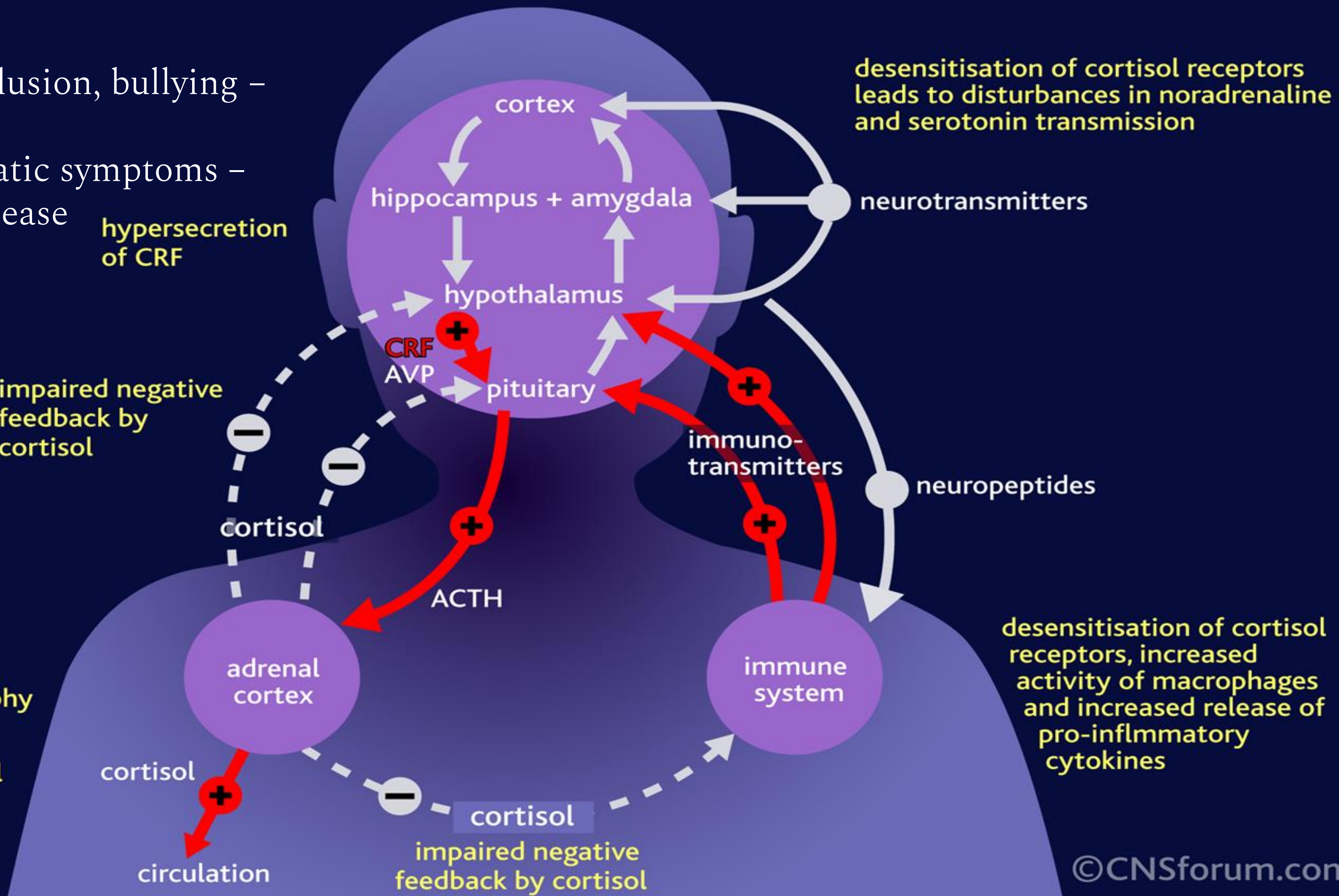
Stigma, exclusion, bullying –
Stress –
Psychosomatic symptoms –
Chronic disease

hypersecretion of CRF

impaired negative feedback by cortisol

adrenal hypertrophy

excess cortisol released



desensitisation of cortisol receptors leads to disturbances in noradrenaline and serotonin transmission

neurotransmitters

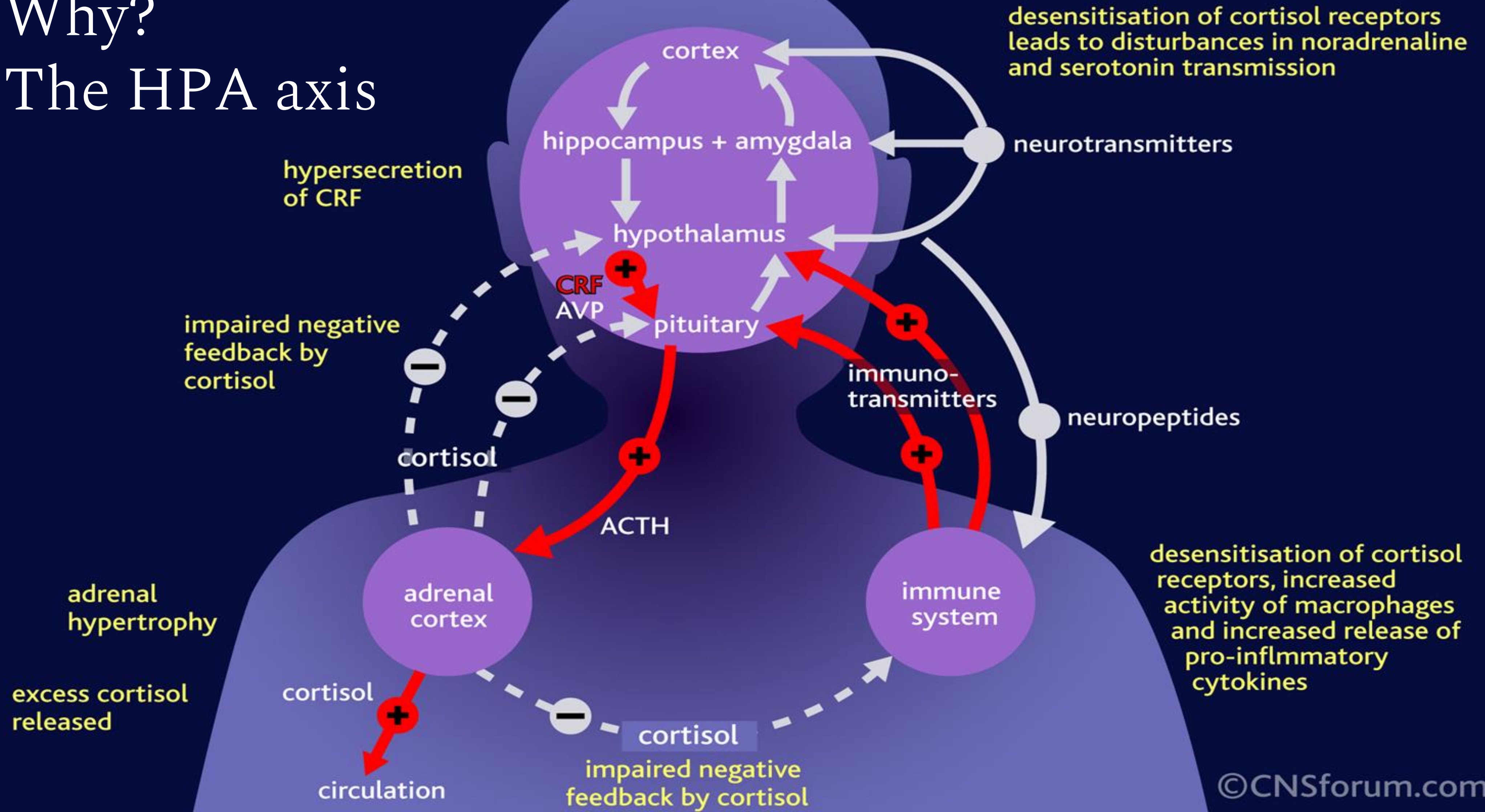
immuno-transmitters

neuropeptides

desensitisation of cortisol receptors, increased activity of macrophages and increased release of pro-inflammatory cytokines

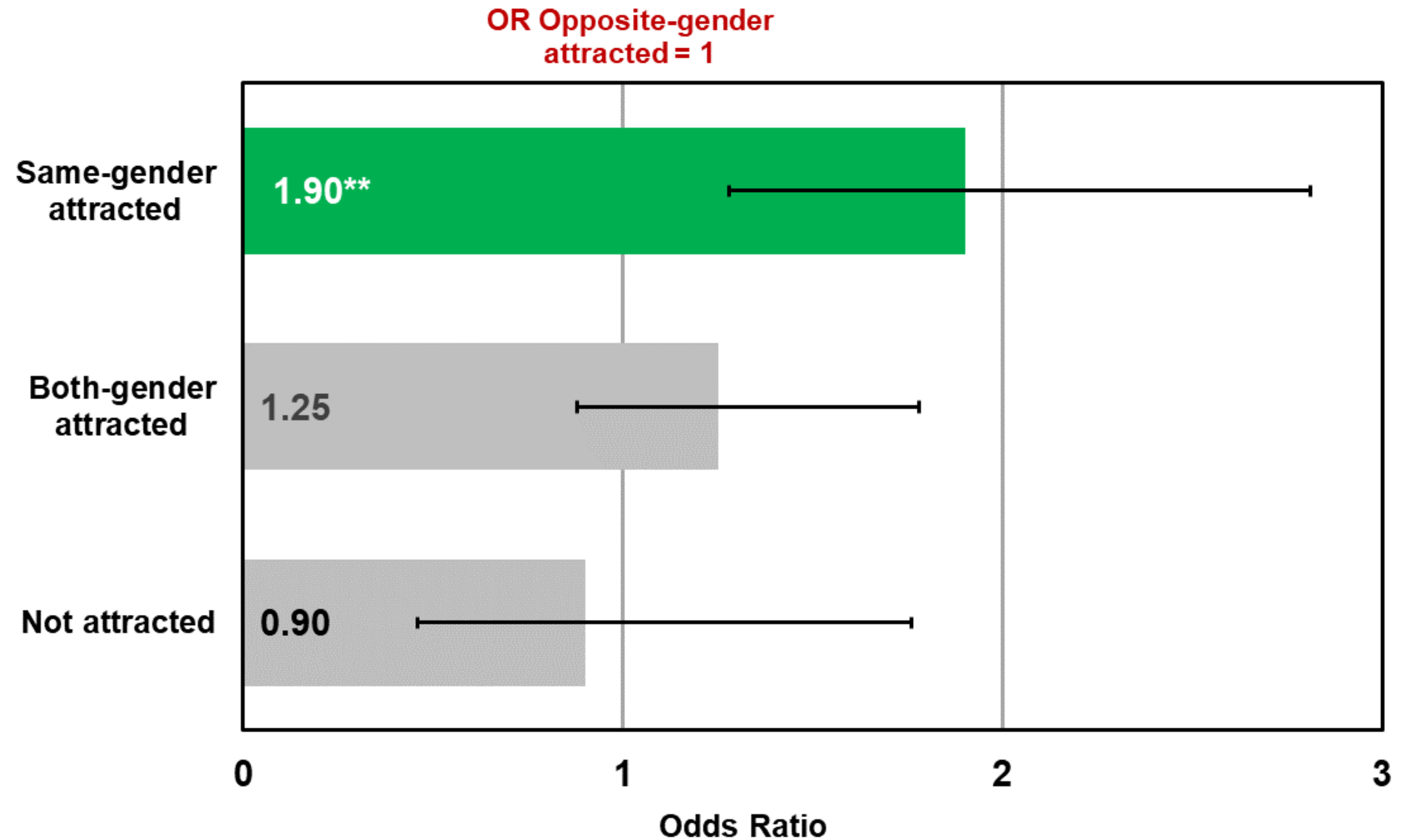
impaired negative feedback by cortisol

Why? The HPA axis



Good news: volunteering

Taking part in volunteer work ($n = 3,332$)



Odds Ratio of those attracted to opposite-gender partners = 1

** $p < .01$

Error bars indicate 95% confidence interval

LGBTQQIAAPP+



New item for sexual orientation

International expert survey with **44 HBSC Principal Investigators** and international pilot study with **782 LGBT+ young people** from Canada, Spain, Ireland and UK

SEXUAL ORIENTATION OPTIONAL ITEM 2022

How would you describe your sexual orientation?

We mean which gender partners are you attracted to.

- Heterosexual (attracted to the opposite gender)
- Mostly heterosexual
- Bisexual (attracted to both girls and boys)
- Gay or lesbian (attracted to the same gender)
- Other (please say what)
- I am not sure yet
- I don't understand the question

New items for sex and gender

BIRTH-REGISTERED SEX AND GENDER IDENTITIY OPTIONAL PACKAGE 2022

What sex were you registered at birth?

- Male
- Female

Identities of people are varied: some people identify themselves as boys, others as girls, and there are people who don't feel represented by either boy or girl.

Please choose the option that best describes you.

- I identify myself as boy
- I identify myself as girl
- I identify myself as neither a boy nor a girl
- I am not sure yet
- I don't understand the question

Take home message

There are large **health disparities** in adolescents across sexual orientation and gender identity groups.

This has long-lasting negative impact into **adulthood**.

LGBTQ+ youth and adults have special health and **healthcare needs**.

We need **robust measures** to assess sexual orientation, gender identity and birth-registered sex of adolescents.

This is an **on-going work** which should involve **LGBTQ+ youth**.





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An Roinn Sláinte
Department of Health

Thank you...

- young people participating in the surveys and sharing their experiences
- their parents, teachers, school principals
- HBSC country teams and Principal Investigators for sharing their data
- The Department of Health (Republic of Ireland) and funders of the other HBSC National Teams
- Dr Jo Inchley (HBSC International Coordinator) and Prof Oddrun Samdal (HBSC Data Bank Manager)
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