

Research on Mental Health Issues in Chinese LGBTQ+ Female Adolescents: Before and After Self-identifying and Coming Out

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Abstract: As the LGBTQ+ community has become more visible over time, societies have begun to pay more attention to these groups of people, whether their basic rights or mental health status. In China, despite the public has begun to raise awareness, there is still progress that we need to make in order to achieve complete visibility and equality. Our study aims to explore the relationship between mental health and LGBTQ+ identity/ coming out in order to provide a potential contribution to the achievement of equality. We designed a survey asking for basic information and details of respondents' mental health status before and after they self-identified and came out. We collected 56 valid responses from the Chinese female LGBTQ+ community and used Excel to analyze the statistics. Our study found that coming out would decrease the frequency of depression and anxiety and increase the level of self-esteem; self-identification has no significant effect on an individual's mental health. Also, coming out to parents and other elders improves an individual's mental health (decrease in depression and anxiety rate, increase in self-esteem) to a greater extent than coming out to close friends, lovers, normal friends, and other peers.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, anxiety, self-esteem, female, adolescents

1. Introduction

In China, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and people with other sexual orientations (LGBTQ+) still face discrimination, and this societal stress can lead to mental health issues [1,2]. Most previous research has focused on Chinese LGBTQ+ students, such as how coming out affects their mental health or the strategies to prevent their psychological stress and suicidality risks [3,4]. Some studies have also looked into mental health issues among transgender women, focusing on the discrimination and violence they experience [5,6].

Despite the growing body of research on LGBTQ+ populations and women, there remains a gap in studies specifically examining LGBTQ+ female adolescents. Our research aims to address this gap by investigating the relationship between LGBTQ+ identity, coming out, and mental health in female adolescents. We focus on key areas such as anxiety, depression, and self-esteem.

In this study, we distributed questionnaires via social media to gather data on the experiences of Chinese LGBTQ+ female adolescents, particularly the changes they experienced before and after self-identifying as LGBTQ+ and coming out. We also explored the reactions toward coming out from their parents, close friends, and other social groups. Through our analysis, we conclude how these factors influence their levels of anxiety, depression, and self-esteem, finally providing insights into the mental health outcomes of the LGBTQ+ female adolescents group.

2. Literature Review

This study is focused on exploring the relationship between mental health issues and LGBTQ+ identification, as well as coming out among female adolescents. Several past studies have touched on related topics, offering valuable insights that help shape the focus of our research.

2.1. Study on LGBTQ+ Students

One study examined the mental health of LGBTQ+ students across 29 provinces in China, with a total of 732 participants regardless of gender. The study used online questionnaires and found that LGBTQ+ individuals face significant societal stress, which places them at high risk for mental health issues. The findings revealed that 85% of LGBTQ+ participants experienced depression, and 40% had contemplated suicide. Many participants chose not to come out to their parents, and the author indicated that enhancing the protection policies toward LGBTQ+ students in Chinese high schools may lead to a better environment [3].

In our study, we similarly address questions related to depression and explore whether or not participants have come out to others. Additionally, we examine how coming out, along with the reactions of others, impacts levels of depression, anxiety, and self-esteem.

2.2. Study on Transgender Women

Another study focused on the mental health of transgender women in Jiangsu Province, China. This study has 250 participants with an average age of 27.9 years. It used a cross-sectional method to compare mental health outcomes among participants with different sexual identities. The research found that the majority of transgender women faced discrimination, including verbal and physical abuse, as well as sexual violence. According to the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, only 32.4% of transgender women were classified as having good mental health, while the rest experienced different degrees of psychological distress [4].

While our study also focuses on female adolescents, the experiences of transgender women provide an important perspective. Both LGBTQ+ and transgender groups face significant societal stress and discrimination, which are central to understanding their mental health challenges. Our questionnaires similarly include questions about bullying and the negative attitudes they have encountered from others.

3. Design and Methods

To understand the influence of the mental effect of coming out for LGBTQ groups, we chose to collect information through a fully transparent questionnaire format for the participants. There are three stages of questions in the questionnaire, which are divided into the basic information, self-identification, and coming out. The three aspects are subdivided into degree of changes in anxiety, depression, and self-esteem before and after self identify, degree of anxiety, depression before and after coming out from 1-5, which represents never, rarely, sometimes, often, always, respectively,

and the degree of self esteem. In the questionnaire, we asked questions about the feelings before and after coming out or self-identify because we could calculate the average value and find the difference.

All samples were taken from Wenjuanxing published through WeChat, with a total of 56 samples, all from the young female population in China, aged between 14-21 years old. 14-15 years old account for 14.55%, 16-17 years old account for 32.73%, 18-19 years old account for 30.91%, and 20-21 years old account for 21.82%. In the data analysis part, we canceled the ineffective answers, for instance, answered all questions within one minute, or gays, because the targets are female. In the first research question, we want to see the average depression before and after coming out, so we use Excel to calculate the difference between depression, anxiety, and self-esteem, and then add them up and divide it by all population. In the second research question, the second research method is to filter the data of each group of respondents before and after coming out using Excel, calculate the differences in depression, anxiety, and self-esteem separately, and then calculate the average. Thus, we get the data in need.

According to the bias theory and out-group bias in social psychology, people tend to reject the LGBTQ+ community. Our theory is that coming out can have a positive impact on the mental health of the LGBTQ+ community, but the degree may vary depending on different demographics. The aims of doing the research is that it reveals all mental pressure of LGBTQ+ through coming out, and it reflexes the cause of mental problems such as social bias and family conflict. Also, this research lowers the risk of mental problem. Through discovering different situation of coming-out, the society knows more about the factors which may cause mental problem. Therefore, the research can provide scientific basis for policy makers and various sectors to promote the establishment of a more inclusive and supportive social environment, and reduce discrimination and prejudice faced by the LGBTQ+ community, thus alleviate their psychological pressure.

4. Result

4.1. RQ1: Does coming out affect individual's anxiety, depression, and self esteem?

After calculating the average levels of self-esteem, anxiety, and depression before and after coming out, we have come to the conclusion that. According to the chart, the average depression before coming out was 2.796 (with the highest depression value being 5), and the average depression after coming out was 2.574, showing a significant decrease. The average anxiety before coming out was 2.759, while the average anxiety after coming out was 2.593, showing a significant decrease. The average self-esteem before coming out was 3.13, and the average self-esteem after coming out was 3.593, showing a significant increase.

4.2. RQ2: Does coming out to each group of people affect respondents' changes in anxiety depression, and self-esteem differently? (before-after)

The second research question is whether coming out to each group of people affect respondents changes in anxiety, depression, and self-esteem differently. The hypothesis is coming out to elder groups may reduce depression and anxiety to a greater extent than coming out to peer groups.

In this stage, the data is obtained by calculating the mean depression, anxiety, and self-esteem before and after coming out to different groups of people and calculating the difference to determine which groups of people can effectively reduce depression and anxiety levels and increase self-esteem when coming out.

According to the data (Figures 1-15), after coming out to parents, the average depression decreased by 0.25. After coming out with a good friend, the average depression decreased by 0.255. After coming out to a loved one, the average depression decreased by 0.178. After coming out to other elders, the average depression decreased by 0.5. After coming out to peers, the average depression

decreased by 0.304. After coming out to parents, the average anxiety decreased by 0.214. After coming out with a good friend, the average anxiety decreased by 0.196. After coming out to your lover, the average anxiety decreased by 0.089. After coming out to other elders, the average anxiety decreased by 0.357. After coming out to peers, the average anxiety decreased by 0.239. After coming out to parents, the average self-esteem increased by 0.5. After coming out with a good friend, the average self-esteem increased by 0.431. After coming out to love, the average self-esteem increased by 0.378. After coming out to other elders, the average self-esteem increased by 0.643. After coming out to peers, the average self-esteem increased by 0.478.

The result is really surprising because according to the questionnaire, most elders show a negative attitude toward LGBTQ+ groups. However, LGBTQ+ groups gain more positive effect though elders are not supportive.

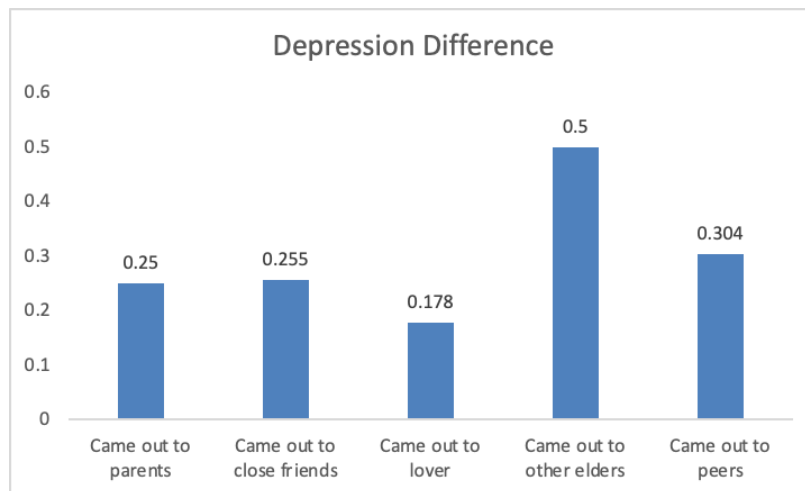


Figure 1: Depression Difference When Coming Out to Different Groups of People

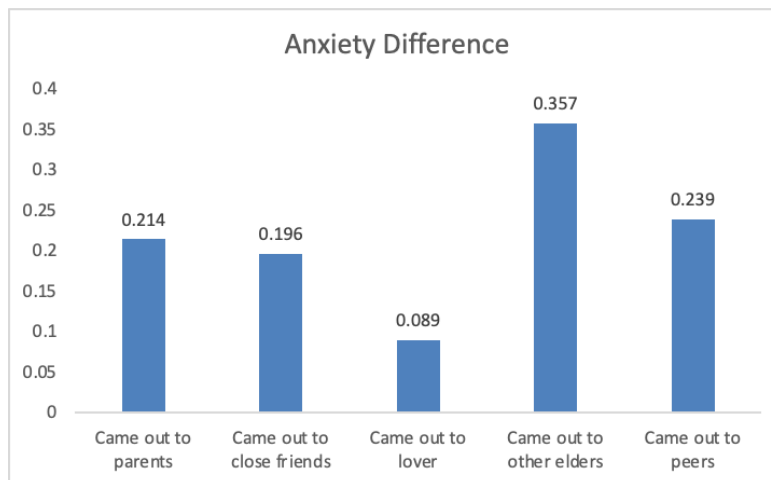


Figure 2: Anxiety Difference When Coming Out to Different Groups of People

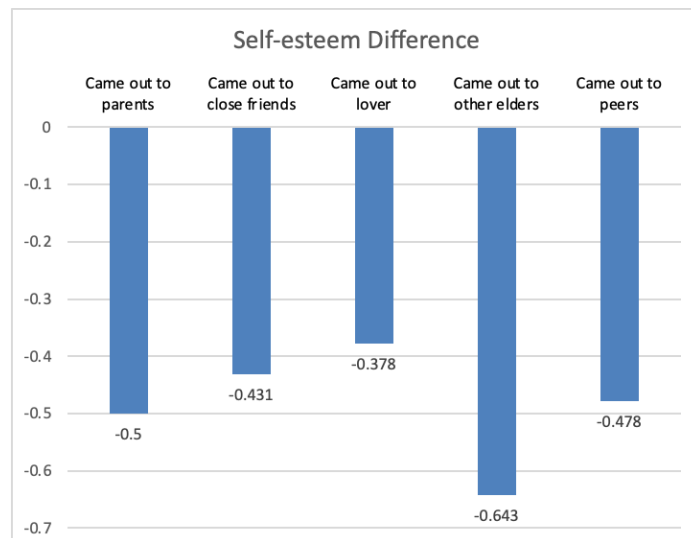


Figure 3: Self-esteem Difference When Coming Out to Different Groups of People

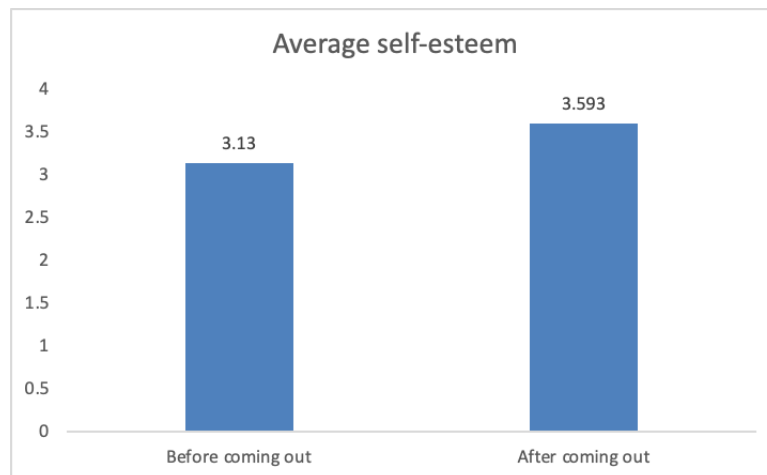


Figure 4: Average Self-esteem Before and After Coming Out

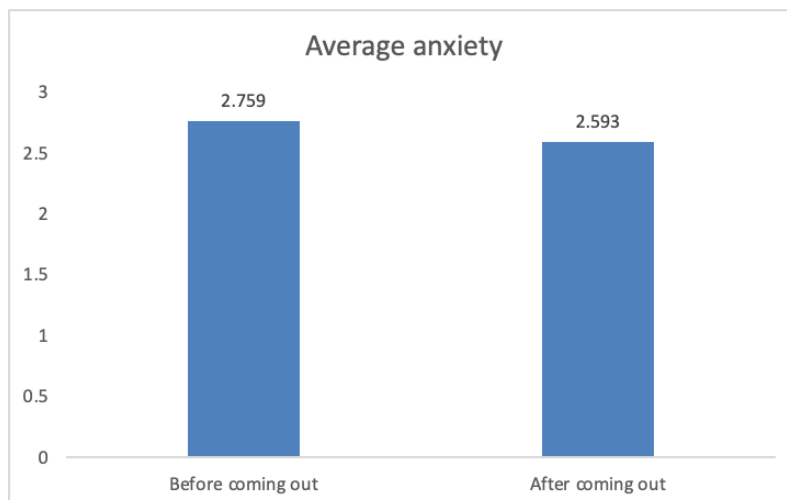


Figure 5: Average Anxiety Before and After Coming Out

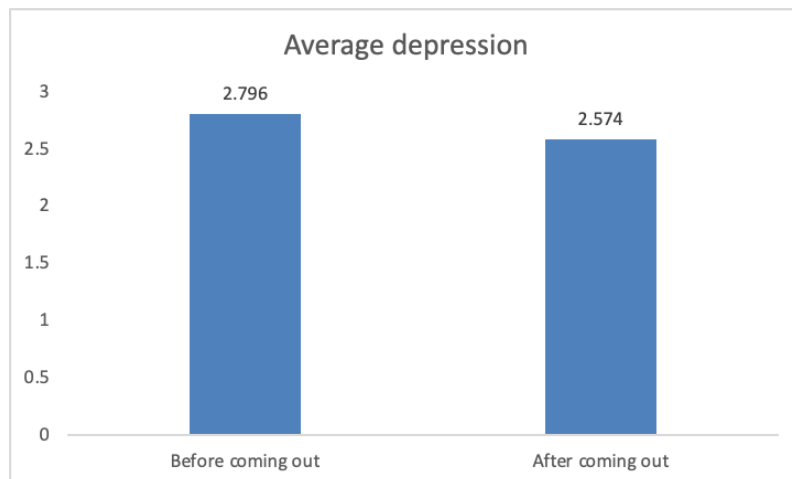


Figure 6: Average Depression Before and After Coming Out

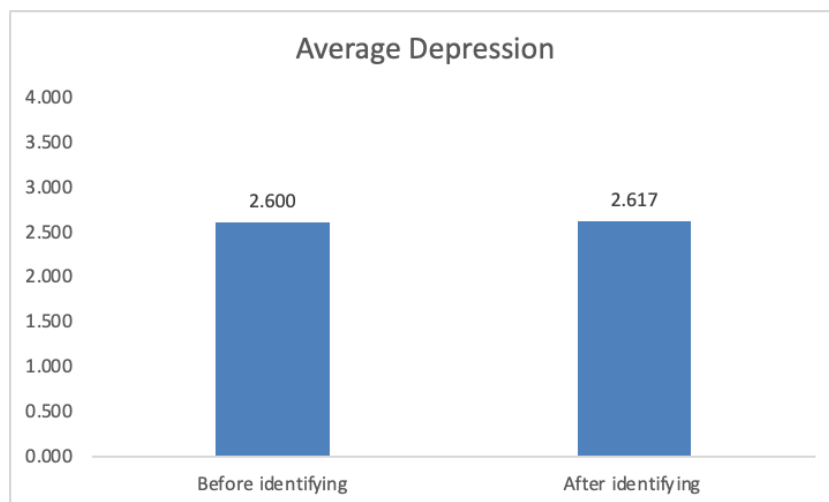


Figure 7: Average Depression Before and After Identifying as LGBTQ+

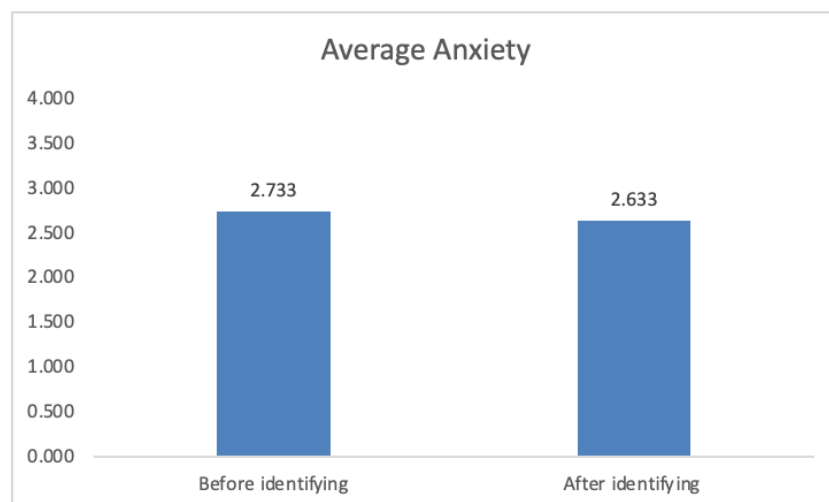


Figure 8: Average Anxiety Before and After Identifying as LGBTQ+

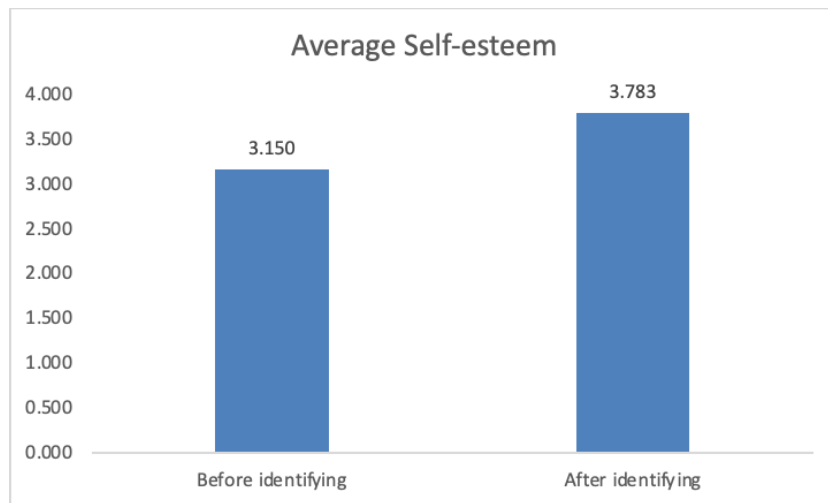


Figure 9: Average Self-esteem Before and After Identifying as LGBTQ+

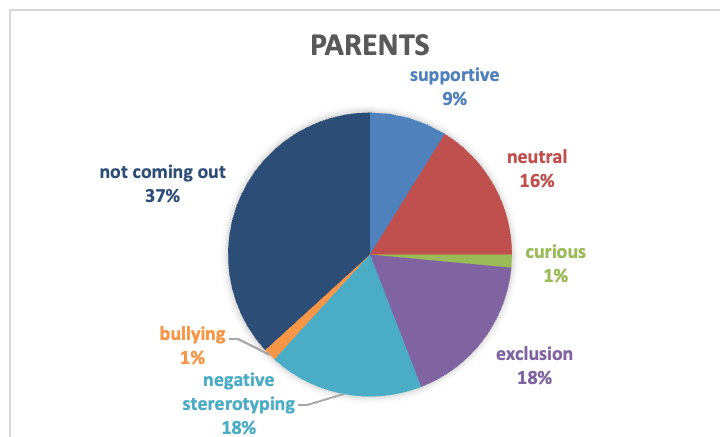


Figure 10: Parents Reaction to Coming Out

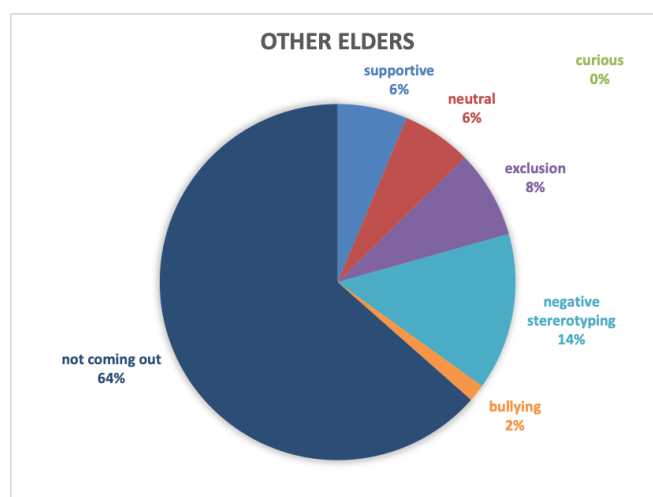


Figure 11: Other Elders Reaction to Coming Out

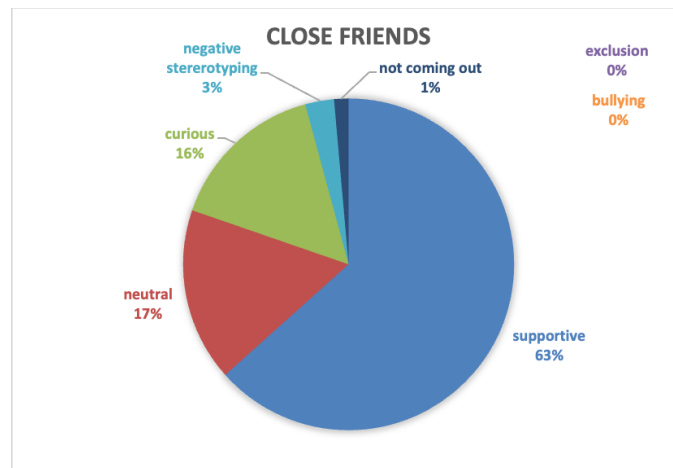


Figure 12: Close Friends Reaction to Coming Out

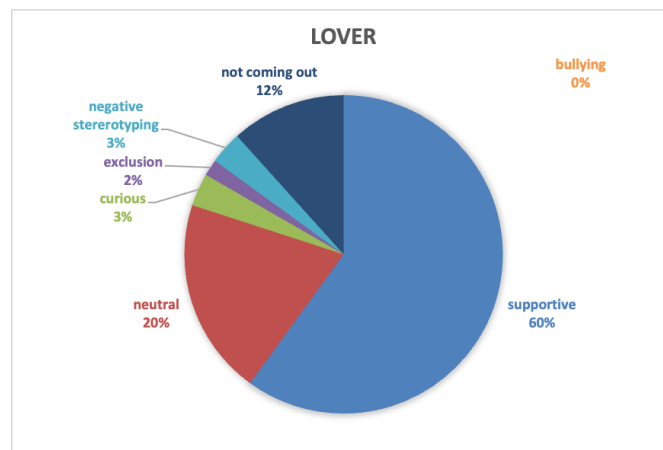


Figure 13: Lovers Reaction to Coming Out

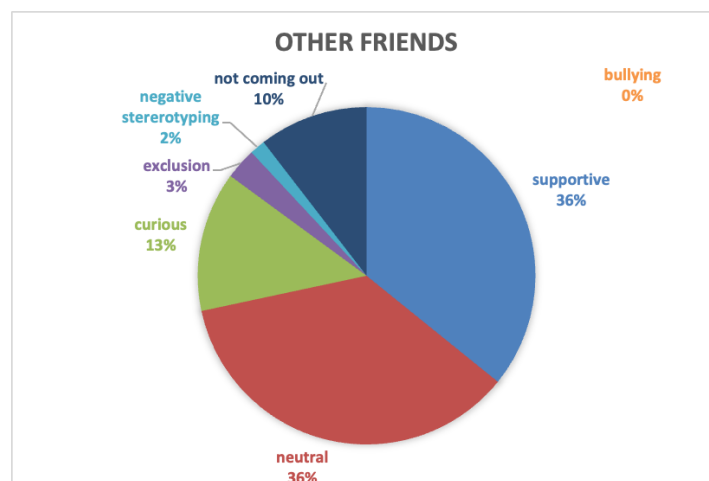


Figure 14: Other Friends Reaction to Coming Out

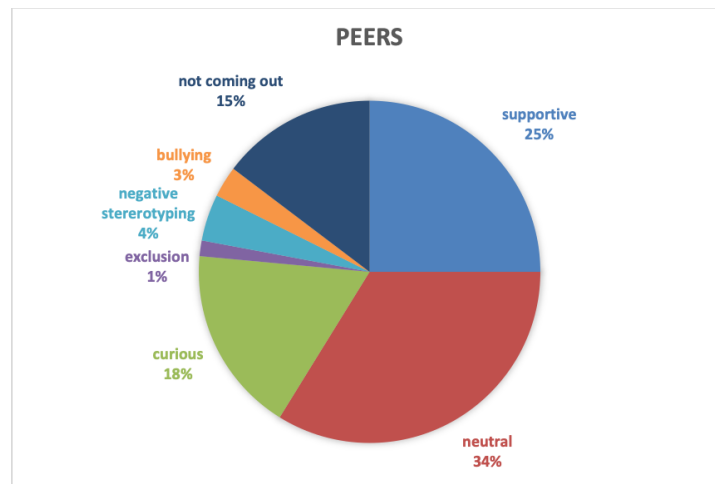


Figure 15: Peers Reaction to Coming Out

5. Discussion

This study is intended to explore the relationship between LGBTQ+ identity/ coming out and individual's mental health in female adolescents, with the primary objective of contributing to possible improvements that could be done in Chinese society in order to. Our data collected by surveys with multiple choice questions provided insights about the extent to which self-identification and coming out affect LGBTQ+ individual's mental health; and also how coming out to different groups of people (parents, friends, peers, elders etc.) affects individual's mental health, specifically depression, anxiety and self esteem, differently. This discussion explores how the findings relate to our research questions, how they verify or challenge our hypothesis, and how future research could be implicated.

5.1. Research question1: Does coming out/ self-identifying affect individual's anxiety, depression, and self-esteem?

The data collected suggests that, for coming out, the average rate of depression and anxiety in individuals decreases, while the level of self-esteem increases after coming out. For self-identification, the data shows that it has no significant impact on an individual's mental health; the average rate of depression, anxiety, and level of self-esteem remain similar before and after coming out. These findings challenge our hypothesis, in which we predicted that individuals who came out might experience more depression and anxiety. Our hypothesis stems from the consideration of the Chinese public's attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ group; individuals may feel depressed and pressured by other people's strange vision, stereotypes, and conservative atmosphere [7]. These negative feedbacks from the social environment may bring potential pressure to individuals, leading to depression and anxiety. However, one possible explanation of our finding is that individuals who came out might feel more relieved since they no longer have to hide their real identity, which could be extremely stressful in some cases; this could potentially decrease the rate of depression and anxiety for individuals. Even though coming out may potentially bring discrimination and exclusion, past research has shown how coming out to people who are supportive, such as friends or family, is extremely beneficial to LGBTQ+ youth's mental health. Starting with coming out to these supportive people, LGBTQ+ individuals could slowly construct a network of support, and therefore leading to better mental health status [8].

Our research question 2 explores specifically how coming out to different groups of people in China affects an individual's mental health to different extents.

5.2. Research question 2: Does coming out to each group of people affect respondents' changes in anxiety, depression, and self-esteem differently?

The analysis of our data revealed that coming out to groups such as parents and elders would reduce depression and anxiety to a greater extent compared to coming out to friends or peers. This result aligns with our hypothesis. For instance, there is a 0.5 decrease in depression for individuals who came out to other elders, while there is a 0.255 decrease in depression for individuals who came out to close friends. This may be explained by the reason that parents and elders are the most “problematic” group to come out to since older people, especially in China, often hold negative stereotypes and prejudice towards LGBTQ+ groups. Parents and other elders’ attitudes are also reflected in our study: among 63% of respondents who came out to their parents, 18% reported that their parents have the attitude of negative stereotyping, and 18% reported that their parents have shown exclusion; as for other elders, among 36% of respondents who came out to this group, 2% reported bullying, 14% reported negative stereotyping, 8% reported exclusion. These results reflected how the older people in China mostly hold negative attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ group. Since they are the most difficult step on the “journey” of disclosing self-identity, coming out to these groups of people may allow LGBTQ+ individuals to feel more relieved since they have completed the most challenging task.

However, these findings contradict with D’Augelli’s study in 2002 and Rosario et al.’s study in 2009, both indicating that LGBTQ+ teenagers who disclosed their identity to family and received negative feedback are under a higher risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts [9,10]. So why would our findings inform that coming out to parents would actually have a greater decrease in depression and anxiety and an increase in self-esteem? The difference between our study and theirs may stem from the limitations of our study. We asked the respondents to check the boxes of the attitudes that each group of people has shown to their coming out, and individuals may come out to multiple groups. While analyzing the data, we filtered the responses to only look at one group at a time, and calculate the change in depression and anxiety of respondents before and after they came out. However, since these respondents may come out to multiple groups, the result of the effect of coming out to a specific group we were looking at may also be affected by the coming out of the respondents to other groups at the same time. For example, if we were to look at the effect of coming out to parents has on LGBTQ+ teenagers’ mental health, these teenagers have probably also come out to their close friends; in this case, we cannot ensure that the change in depression and anxiety in these adolescents is caused by parents instead of close friends.

Another limitation of the study is that, very few respondents in our study has came out to parents comparing to the amount of respondents who came out to peers, the average calculated with these limited samples (54% came out to parents and 27% came out to other elders) may be more extreme than the ones that are calculated with more samples (98% came out to close friends, 87% to lovers, 87% to normal friends, and 81% to other peers).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, our findings addressed the research questions “Does coming out/ self-identifying affect an individual’s anxiety, depression, and self-esteem?” and “Does coming out to each group of people affect respondents' changes in anxiety, depression, and self-esteem differently?”. For research question one, we found that coming out to parents decreases depression and anxiety levels and increases self-esteem levels, while self-identification has no significant impact on adolescents’ depression, anxiety, and self-esteem. For research question two, we found that coming out to parents and other elders would decrease depression and anxiety and increase self-esteem levels to a greater extent compared to coming out to peer groups. Our findings contribute to understanding the relationship found between female LGBTQ+ adolescents’ self-identification/ coming out and mental

health status. This assists in developing a better LGBTQ+-friendly environment and support network in China by informing how these two events (self-identification and coming out) impact individuals' mental health and, further, how other people's reactions to coming out could affect individuals' mental health. Further research could focus more on the long-term effect of coming out on LGBTQ+ adolescents' mental health, as well as the role of cultural and societal factors in shaping these outcomes within the context of China. Future research could also investigate how the reactions of different groups of people, especially family and friends who interact more frequently with LGBTQ+ individuals, could contribute to constructing a supporting and inclusive environment in China.

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