

# Effect of Concealment and Outness of Gender and Sexual Orientation on Self Esteem in Lgbtqia+ Individuals

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**Abstract:-** The present study experimentally investigated the effect of concealment and outness of a person's sexual orientation and gender identity on their self-esteem. This was strictly restricted to LGBTQIA+ individuals. A survey was taken using online platforms, and the participants (N=289) were asked a series of questions in order to measure their concealment using the 'Sexual Orientation Concealment Scale', their outness using the 'Outness Inventory' and their self-esteem using the 'Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale'. The results display an obvious effect, with the self-esteem being directly proportional to their outness and indirectly proportional to their concealment. While factors such as parental support, depression and anxiety are frequently studied in LGBTQIA+ individuals, self-esteem and outness rarely are. This study has severe implications, taking into account that a person's self-esteem might take a huge hit even if they have accepted themselves, due to them having to be closeted. It necessitates the need for a community, for psychoeducation of the masses and for establishing ways in order to help the individual come out, previously largely being focused on self-acceptance alone.

**Keywords:-** Self-esteem, Outness, Concealment, LGBTQIA+

## I. INTRODUCTION

Imagine having a crisis about who you are, about your gender, or about who you love or are attracted to. Imagine being shamed for it, and criticized. Being lgbtq brings with it a lot of judgement, unfair treatment, and harassment in some level or the other. Such strenuous situations carry with it, holding in hand, a whole lot of mental health problems.

LGBTQIA+ is shorthand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Agender/Asexual, Pansexual, Genderqueer, and others. Queer is an umbrella term that refers to the matrix of sexual orientations and gender identities, inclusive of every identity that isn't cisgender heterosexual. Reclaimed after years of being used as a slur, 'queer' is now used for self-identification. Sexual orientation is the desire or lack thereof for intimate emotional or sexual relationships with someone of the same/different/multiple genders. This includes Lesbian (attraction of women towards other women) Gay (attraction of men towards other men) Bisexual/Biromantic (attraction of someone to two or more genders), Pansexual/Panromantic (attraction to someone regardless of gender), Aromantic/Asexual (lack of attraction to anyone), Demisexual/Demiromantic (attraction to someone only on developing a strong emotional connect) and

others. Sex is the medical term designated to someone when they are born based on primary and secondary sexual characteristics. This could be female, male, or intersex (general term used for situations in which a person's sexual anatomy doesn't fall into the male or female boxes). This might not be the same as the gender identity, which is the gender that someone attributes to themselves, including but not limited to female, male, genders in between and out of this spectrum (genderqueer, genderfluid, two spirited, agender, non-binary, pangender, gender neutral, bigender, etc.) When a person's gender identity differs from their sex at birth, they are called transgender.

(Eli Green, 2004) A person who is transgender might thus experience gender dysphoria, and might choose to transition into their chosen gender with hormonal therapy and/or gender reassignment surgery. However, this is a choice and not something that every transgender person picks for themselves. They might all choose different pronouns to go with.

It is not uncommon for members of this community to, thus, be closeted and not out. Being closeted is an adjective used for people who have not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is also referred to as 'being in the closet'. Coming out is the process by which people of the lgbtqia+ community come to terms with themselves and reveal their sexuality or chosen gender. This can refer to both their loved ones and friends, as well as the bigger public. The term 'glass closet' is used when a person comes out to their near and dear, but not to the public. Coming out can be immensely hard for people, something that is an experience that most members of the lgbtqia+ community have. Though it is conceptualised as a one-time experience, it is a lifelong process by which people have to decide to come out to different people in different spheres of their lives, home, work, etc. and different times. Though in a few cases, the process gets easier over time, for some it might not.

Understandably, members of this community often have a lot of stressors attached to both being closeted, as well as coming out. They are subjected to anti-lgbtqia+ prejudices all their life, both by the society, and their families. These attitudes include moral condemnations of homosexuality, and queerness, homophobia, heterosexism, and violence (Drescher, 2004). They often feel lonely, confused, shameful, angry and fearful. Coming out stressors such as whether the person they come out to will understand, treat them the same way, judge them, be angry or violent, feel sad, and if they will

be safe definitely show us why LGBTQIA+ individuals are thrice as likely to experience a mental health issue.

The individual's reaction might range from accepting themselves to substance abuse, and everything in between (Ali, 2018). In cases where the person has accepted their being lgbtqia+, their fear of not being accepted, and the culture they grew up in can force them to remain closeted. These people thus, might choose to keep this sphere of their life separate from themselves. Further, there are people who deny these feelings and cannot accept this part of themselves. They're called the non-lgbtqia+-identified individuals. They might recognize, but try to change their sexual orientation or gender identity, though this isn't a probable outcome. A person might go down one path first, and change half-way as well (Drescher, 2004).

However, most are forced to conceal a part of themselves, and this makes them hide important aspects of their lives. They are robbed of having social conversations about their feelings, attractions and fantasies. They end up thus doing their best to keep this part of themselves out of their public persona, and unintegrated, they start to dissociate this part of themselves from their version of their 'self'. This process of dissociation, takes place over time, as the person slowly phases out this part of their life by the process of selective attention, where they fail to pay attention to cues regarding this issue, as a defence mechanism. They slowly develop a double life, and might be completely unaware of this. All thoughts and reflections that are anxiety provoking are not heeded, and dissociated. (RE, 2002) Dissociation is more in people who face/ have faced trauma related to discrimination in regards to their queerness. (Keating L, 2020)

Needless to say, this whole process affects the self-esteem of lgbtqia+ members. Microaggressions predict a lower self-esteem as a whole. Ones that take place in the workplace or in the educational environment has a greater effect. Microaggressions are subtle statements and behaviours that unconsciously communicate denigrating messages. (Kevin L. Nadal, 2014)

LGBTQIA+ individuals spend their whole lives trying to overcome the negative beliefs about being queer being instilled in them. This internalised oppression, caused by the discrimination one is exposed to through media, their culture, and community, reduces self-esteem and breeds self-doubt as well. (Leaven, 2003)

Correlations between self-disclosure, involvement in the lgbtqia+ community and self-esteem have found to be positive and the correlation between internalised homophobia and self-esteem have found to be negative. Positivity of gay identity is a predictor of psychological health, which is in turn a predictor of a high self-esteem. (Parkhurst, 2004) Outness is the 'degree to which people disclose and live out their sexual identity'. (Troiden, 1988). An assumption that can be made is that the outness of a person is directly proportional to their self-esteem (Parkhurst, 2004). This leads to the other

hypothesis that the degree of concealment is indirectly proportional to the self-esteem of the person.

Parkurst found that self-esteem increased as the outness increased, along with positive attitudes towards their gender and sexual identities, and if they spend lesser time trying to pass as straight. While Parkurst focused on 44 women alone, mainly concentrated on Caucasian individuals, the present study has 289 individuals, not exclusive to women alone, with individuals of mixed ethnicities, including Indian, Caucasian, and Black.

## II. METHOD

### ➤ *Participants*

A sample of 289 individuals was taken for the present study, reached using online LGBTQIA+ social media accounts, and announcements through friends. The study contained 174 females, 35 non-binary, 27 males, 11 questioning, 8 genderfluid, 7 demigirl, 5 agender, 3 demiboy, 2 unidentified, 2 genderflux, and 15 gender-queer. The distribution of sexual orientations included 137 bisexual/biromantic, 34 pansexual, 32 lesbian, 18 asexual/aromantic, 14 gay, 4 trixix, 1 toric, 1 agatic, 1 omnisexual, 17 questioning, 6 unlabelled, and 24 queer individuals. They fell within the age range of 11 and 38, with 263 responses lying within the range of 13 and 18. 269 of the participants were students, 11 were employed and 9 were unemployed.

### ➤ *Measures and Procedure*

Participants filled a series of online questionnaires, that takes approximately 5 minutes to complete overall. The order of the questions was the same for every participant who took the test. They were asked to be as honest as possible.

The Sexual Orientation Concealment Scale (SOCS) was used to measure the concealment of their sexual minority scale. It is a 6-item measure designed to assess items such as avoidance strategies and counterfeiting strategies. It uses a 5-point likert scale for all the 6 items, and none of them are reverse-scored (Mohr S. D., 2016). It was modified slightly to include gender identity concealment as well.

The Outness Inventory (OI) was used to measure the degree to which individuals are open about their sexual orientation and gender. It is a 11-item measure designed to indicate the degree to which the respondent's sexual orientation and gender identification is known and openly discussed with various types of individuals, including mother, father, siblings, extended family/relatives, new straight friends, work peers, work supervisors, members and leaders of the individual's religious community, strangers and new acquaintances, and old heterosexual friends. It measures the outness in the dimensions of family, world, religion and the overall outness. It's measured as 8 options, scored from 1 to 7, starting the scoring from the person definitely not knowing about it to the person knowing about it and talking about it openly (Mohr J. , 2000).

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale was used to measure the global self-worth by measuring positive and negative feelings about the self. The 10 items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. It deals with general feelings about the self, including questions like “on the whole, I am satisfied with myself”, and “I certainly feel useless at times” (Rosenberg, 1965).

### III. RESULTS

The 6 responses to the Sexual Orientation Concealment Scale were all condensed into a single score by averaging them. The 11 questions in the Outness Inventory were condensed into the following domains- out to family, out to world and out to religion. A final overall outness score was calculated as well. The self-esteem was calculated using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and obtaining the sum of all the responses given. The sexual orientation concealment score and the outness scores were correlated with the self-esteem using Pearson’s correlation. A correlation analysis was done for the individual domains in outness as well.

As predicted, the sexual orientation concealment is moderately negatively correlated to the amount of self-esteem of a person. As the person’s concealment of their sexual orientation and gender identity goes up, their self-esteem reduces. The outness of a person is moderately positively correlated to the amount of self-esteem of a person. When the degree of outness of a person increases, their self-esteem goes up accordingly. In the outness, the outness a person is to a family determines the self-esteem lesser than the outness to the world. The outness to religion has a negligible correlation. The mean of the self-esteem is 22.806.

The regression equation for concealment is  $\hat{y} = -1.35482X + 26.21594$  and that for the outness is  $\hat{y} = 1.22954X + 20.75901$ .

Sexual Orientation Concealment:  $r(287) = -.332, p < .00001$   
 Outness to Family:  $r(287) = .226, p = .000106$   
 Outness to World:  $r(287) = .229, p = .000085$   
 Outness to Religion:  $r(287) = .012, p = .839039$ . It is not significant.  
 Overall outness:  $r(287) = 0.258, p < .00001$ .

### IV. DISCUSSION

The findings are in line with the hypothesis, and we find that concealment has a negative impact on the self-esteem of the person and outness has a positive impact. The correlation was only moderate in cases of concealment and slight in terms of outness. This could be due to the fact that other areas have a greater impact on the self-esteem of the individual, including the duration of time they have been out, which was not included in the study. Further, the study mainly consisted of students, which could have also influenced the findings obtained because the time between self-awareness and the present is much lesser as compared to people who have been out for a longer duration to a selected number of people. Most students are adolescents, which means they are still in the phase of self-discovery.

The correlation that is existent, however, shows the importance of coming out of the closet, and living without hiding any parts of themselves. The number of stressors associated to coming out, must hence be our focus, something that should be reduced. Anti-LGBTQIA+ prejudices should be eliminated in order to create a safe and happy coming out experience for all individuals. Condemnations of homosexuality, and queerness, homophobia, heterosexism, and violence must be reduced. The average overall self-esteem of the whole sample is only 22.806, which, out of 40, is only 57%. The reason for this low self-esteem as compared to the average could be due to the existence of these factors as well.

This can be achieved by:

- Implementing pro-LGBTQIA+ laws
- Banning and flagging content that promotes violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals actively
- Psycho-educating masses and increasing awareness
- Creating easy access for LGBTQIA+ children/teens to reach out about their mental health.
- Better representation of LGBTQIA+ members in media.

As mentioned in Table 2, individuals who identify as ‘queer’ or have chosen to not add any specific labels have the highest self-esteem, and those who identify as pansexual, or are still figuring out their sexuality have the least self-esteem. This might be due to the fact that people who identify as ‘queer’ or prefer to be unlabelled have lesser norms attached to them, while the others do. This could lead to a psychological distancing from the prejudices attached to LGBTQIA+. Pansexuals are a sexuality who aren’t fully accepted even inside the LGBTQIA+ community, which could be the reason for the low self-esteem.

The LGBTQIA+ field requires much more research and focus. The mental health of this strata of society is something that needs to be paid attention to. Methods to improve the self-esteem, and help better the coming out process needs to be done. The focus this paper presented on this area is only the beginning.

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Table 1: Correlation between Concealment, Outness and Self-Esteem

	<b>Correlation</b>	<b>r2 regression coefficient</b>	<b>P value</b>
<i>Sexual Orientation Concealment Scale</i>	-.332	.1100	< .00001.
<i>Outness (OUT TO FAMILY)</i>	.226	.0510	.000106.
<i>Outness (OUT TO WORLD)</i>	.229	.0520	.000085.
<i>Outness (OUT TO RELIGION)</i>	.012	.0001	.839039. The result is not significant at p < .05.
<i>OVERALL OUTNESS</i>	.258	.6656	< .00001.

Table 2: Self-esteem of different demographics

<b>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</b>	<b>SELF-ESTEEM</b>
<i>ASEXUAL/AROMANTIC</i>	22.47
<i>BISEXUAL/BIROMANTIC</i>	23.43
<i>GAY</i>	23.5
<i>LESBIAN</i>	22
<i>PANSEXUAL</i>	21.69
<i>QUEER/UNLABELLED</i>	24
<i>QUESTIONING</i>	21.63