

# Mental Health Disturber: Heteronormativity and LGBTQ+ Students in Mainland China

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**Abstract**—This study examined the relationship between heteronormative school environment and mental health of Chinese LGBTQ+ teenagers. An online questionnaire with 116 valid responses was used to compare mental health condition of LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students, and one-on-one qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 LGBTQ+ participants on their school experiences. The results of the questionnaire data showed no significant difference between mental health of LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ respondents. For interviews, heteronormativity was showed to be present in various aspects at school, including peer interactions, sexuality education, textbook and teaching, school-based counseling services, dress code, school policies, and infrastructure. Both interviewees from traditional Chinese schools and international schools in China were involved, and a series of differences were found between the two types of schools. This study also provides suggestions for schools and policy makers to create a more inclusive school environment. Future research can further investigate the influence of different school types on heteronormativity.

**Index Terms**—Heteronormativity, LGBTQ, mental health, China

## I. HETERONORMATIVITY AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Heteronormativity, defined as the concept that heterosexuality is the preferred or normal mode of sexual orientation [1], is proved to shape “the production of identities, relationships, cultural expressions, and institutional practices, revealing it to be a force with consequences well beyond the discrimination against lesbians and gay men” [2]. Heteronormativity puts the system that ought to offer hospitality – in the case of this study, schools – at risk [3]. It conditions the way students of specific genders feel that they should behave to be viewed as ‘normal’ or ‘appropriate’ [4].

With the everyday school experiences immersed in heteronormative norms [5, 6], sexual power is imposed by norms on heterosexual and binary standards in environment surrounding students for all sexual formations and expressions [7]–[9], resulting in ‘invisibility’ of queer students and relationships. From 28,454 Chinese LGBTQ+ respondents of a survey by United Nations Development Programme (2016), only 5.1% were fully open about their queer identity at schools. A school teacher with 14 years of teaching experience suggested that she often witnesses heterosexual couples displaying intimate behaviour on campus (e.g., holding hands, kissing), but had never seen affection being shown publicly between couples of the same

gender in the institution. Despite having a few students came out to her personally, none of them have ever mentioned anything about their partner or love life to her [10].

Plus, heteronormativity also conditions and limits the freedom of gender expression. Students often have to illustrate more ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ characteristics to be viewed as ‘normal’ in schools. Having gender expressions not allied with their gender role, identifying as transgender or non-binary gender identities could result in harassment and bullying. Redilus carried out interviews with students aged 15 to 16. The students mentioned that straight girls are expected to show a lack of confidence and reluctance during competitive school games and are expected to have confidence in partner dancing. In contrast, straight boys have to be confident in aggressive and competitive behaviour, such as team ball games. If male students display few ‘masculine behaviors’, the word ‘fag’ is used as a slur towards them [11]. This could be particularly troublesome to transgender students who are or are planning on going through a transition, putting them in a vulnerable position of bullying and discrimination. Students with non-binary gender identities, whose gender expression may not fit stereotypical male or female standard, would be under distinct challenges in a heteronormative environment [12–14]. They might feel particularly noticeable for their difference from their binary peers, while also being invisible for being “unrecognizable” or “foreign” to others [15]. Thus, it is highly possible that the heterosexual and cis-gendered, binary based norms in schools could have been the reason why queer students are less open on their identity and relationships.

The heteronormative social norms, attitudes, and ideology that marginalize queer students are often maintained by existing practice and regulations carried out by educational leaders [16]. Nonetheless, queer educators also feel similar pressure as their queer students in teaching environments, mostly due to heteronormative school rules and attitudes from students, parents, and other faculty members. Bellini carried out interviews with queer teachers, guidance counselors, teaching assistants, and board employees [18]. Some participants described their experience of being judged and rejected by other teachers in school, illustrating low homonormative tolerance in school environment. Fear of retribution by community and parents was also mentioned a few times as a common theme that kept the educators from addressing queer issues. In a more recent study with 40 current and previous gay educators in Chinese universities, the majority of them expressed their worries about mentioning queer issues in classroom because of concerns on potential homophobic reactions from students and possibility in being reported to the leadership of universities, which could result in administrative penalties [17]. Some participants also claimed that their ability to address queer issues was limited by the official textbooks and regulations

Manuscript received April 8, 2023; revised August 20, 2023; accepted September 20, 2023.

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doi: 10.18178/ijssh.2023.13.6.1182

they have to follow. One participant claimed that “all the teachers are required to submit their teaching slides” and he “was asked to delete slides relating to homosexuality”, which lead him to believe that “homosexuality conflicts with the Party-state ideologies”. This proves that the current educational material and rules are not inclusive enough (or even repellent) for mention of queer topics. Similar problems are also present in training for educators, where a few participants suggested that queer students were seldom or never mentioned in their preservice programs [18]. All of the aforementioned factors experienced by educators lead to a low percentage of queer issues being introduced to students at school. Students claimed that there have been rare mentions of non-heterosexual relations, and that transgender people are usually completely left out when speaking of gender during classes [19]. Only 10% out of 28,454 Chinese participants stated that they received education on queer issues at school, with the majority of them occurring during undergraduate or higher educational stage [20]. This implies the absence of such education provided to secondary and high school students.

## II. SCHOOL CLIMATE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Furthermore, “school climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices, and organizational structures” [21]. Research has shown that school climate – “the quality and character of school life.” [21] – is associated with students' mental health [23–26]. This can include feeling of connection to school, feeling of safety at school, protection of psychological well-being and peer support [27]. A long-lasting positive school climate improves students' social, emotional and mental development, which guarantee both physical and social safety of students [28, 29].

Under heteronormative school climate, past research have revealed a significant difference between mental health of queer students and their cisgender heterosexual peers. There's abundant evidence that the emotional support for queer students in schools have not been addressed [30–32]. Queer teens who do not feel safe or supported in schools often develop a range of mental issues, such as hopeless feelings, depression, suicidal thoughts, or even severe alcohol and drug addiction [18]. More than 80% of queer people have felt frustrated or worried due to their queer identity [20], with 29.5% disclosed feeling sad or hopeless almost every day or two or more weeks in a row in a year [33]. A history of mental illness diagnosis was reported from 30.1% queer participants, compared with 19.9% for non-queer participants [34]. Meta-analytic evidence displays that queer teenagers have around 3 times the possibility of committing suicide compared to heterosexual youth [35]. Atteberry-Ash's research shows that 8% queer high school students reported a suicide attempt in the year of 2019, with 4.1% of which included two or more attempts (2020). For transgender individuals in particular, 10% of the participants aged from 18 to 25 revealed having suicide attempt in the year of 2015, with 34% of whose first attempt came before the age of 13 [36].

## III. THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Although there has been large amount of evidence for heteronormativity in schools and mental health problems of queer students, such evidence is lacked in research based in Mainland China. Much work carried out on the heteronormativity in school environment since the 1990s were primarily in the US [37-39], with a range of research on the public school system in the US [40-44]. A number of student participants even addressed homosexuality as a ‘western imposition’ [45]. China, the country with largest population in the world, is likely to have the largest queer population of all countries. National demographic research carried out by Chinese Family Planning Association found that [46], out of 54,580 student participants from 1,764 Chinese colleges, 16.26% identified as sexual orientations other from heterosexual, and another 6.46% were questioning their sexual orientation. Knowing that there are currently 83,407,925 Chinese students enrolled in secondary education and 41,630,000 in high school education [47], it would be sensible to estimate the total LGBTQ+ students in Chinese secondary and high school education is over 25 million. Under such large queer population base, however, lies the deficiency in research targeting heteronormativity and queerness in Mainland China from students' perspective. Thus, we sought to carry out this research to fill up the existing gap in research.

The aim of this research is to investigate the (1) difference in mental health of LGBTQ+ students and their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts; (2) the relationship between heteronormativity in school climate and mental health of queer students. We hypothesize that (1) sexual orientation minority students have worse mental health than their heterosexual peers; (2) gender minority students have worse mental health than their cisgender peers; (3) heteronormativity in school climate has a negative effect on mental health of LGBTQ+ students. All participants were students aged above 13, who were students enrolled in secondary and/or high school in mainland China.

## IV. METHODS

### A. Participants

The sample for the online survey was made up of 116 students aged from 13 to 20 years old ( $M = 16.69$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ). All participants were middle school or high school students in mainland China. Most of the participants were identified as cis-gender female ( $n = 88$ , 75.8%). Participants identified as cis-gender male ( $n = 19$ , 16.3%), non-binary ( $n = 4$ , 3.4%), transgender male ( $n = 2$ , 1.7%), transgender female ( $n = 2$ , 1.7%) and questioning ( $n = 1$ , 0.8%) were also included. Participants were recruited via an e-poster with a QR code for the questionnaire. The poster was distributed through WeChat. A consent statement was provided at the start of the survey. All participants agreed to participate.

Fifteen students aged from 15 to 18 took part in the interview ( $M = 17.02$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ), all were current middle school or high school students in mainland Chinese schools. Gender identities of interviewees were as following: cis-gender female ( $n = 7$ ), cis-gender male ( $n = 5$ ), transgender female ( $n = 1$ ), transgender male ( $n = 1$ ),

non-binary ( $n = 1$ ). Volunteer sampling was used. The participants were recruited by entering their contact information in a text box at the end of the questionnaire.

Since differences between two school types were found to be nonnegligible in interview responds, some aspects of interview results were assessed based on the school types. "Traditional Chinese schools" in this study referred to Chinese public middle/high schools from which students had qualification for attending ZhongKao and GaoKao admission exams. "International Schools" referred to private schools in China that followed international curriculum, such as AP, IB, and A-LEVEL. Of the 15 interviewees, 10 attended traditional middle school, 5 attended international middle school, 8 attended international high school, and 7 attended traditional high school.

### *B. Online Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was adapted from Supporting LGBT Lives Survey [48]. The questionnaire was translated into mandarin. We first tested the questionnaire with 10 students and modified it according to feedback from them to ensure the questionnaire's accuracy and understandability. Both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ participants were included, in order to make comparison between the two groups.

The questionnaire was constructed using wjx.cn – a popular Chinese online survey platform. The survey was opened for participation on April 16th, 2022, and remained active until April 26th, 2022. The questionnaire was designed to be completed within 5 minutes. Although the questions were designed to collect quantitative data, textboxes were provided in several questions for participants to add any additional information or further explanation. For example, for the question "Which statement(s) best describe the self-harm behaviour(s) you engaged in?", an option of "Others" with a blank textbox was provided for the respondents to fill in any self-harm behaviour that was not listed in the provided choices.

The participants' age, current grade of school, gender identity and sexual orientation were collected. Multiple choice questions and rating-scale questions were used to assess the participants' mental health and well-being, including the Self-Esteem Scale [49]. The scale was consisted of 10 self-describing statements, 5 were positive (e.g. I feel that I have a number of good qualities) and 5 were negative (e.g. I certainly feel useless at times). Responds were rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). Negative items were reverse coded so higher scores represented higher self-esteem. For self-harm behaviour, multiple choice questions regarding types and incidents of self-harm behaviour participants had carried out were asked. Times of suicidal thoughts and attempts were also measured using multiple choice questions. Questions such as "How much was your suicide attempt(s) related to your gender identity? (a) Very much related; (b) Very related; (c) Somewhat related; (d) Not very related; (e) Not at all related" were included to assess the relation between certain thoughts or behaviour or attempts and identity of participants.

### *C. Semi-structured interview*

After data collection of the questionnaire, a series of qualitative interview was carried out. Only LGBTQ+ participants were interviewed. The interviews were conducted online via WeChat voice call. Each interview

lasted around 30 minutes. A consent form was sent to each participant a few days before the interview, and their consent was collected through a text reply. A consent statement was repeated at the beginning of each call. Participants were given an opportunity to ask any question regarding the interview and the research before giving their consent again and starting the interview.

Nine questions from a predesigned interview guide were covered in each interview, to mainly understand participants' experience and feelings towards heteronormativity at school. Topics regarding teaching and textbook, gender inclusive education and sex education, school-based mental health services, and school policies were included, such as "Does your school provide psychological counseling service to students? If so, have you been counselled?". Additional follow-up questions were added according to the response from each interviewee. For instance, if a transgender female participant responded "Yes" to the question "Have you experienced grouping by gender at school?", she would then be asked: "Could you describe how does this make you feel?". Interviewees' school types (traditional Chinese school vs. international school) were also collected during the interviews.

All the interviews were carried out in mandarin, and the interview questions were asked in a preorganized order. Brief typed notes were taken down during the interviews for subsequent data. All interviews were audio-recorded, ensuring accuracy of notes and quotes.

Before the end of the interview, the participants were asked if they had anything to say in addition. The participants were then thanked for their time and were allowed to end the call.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results from the questionnaire were overall statistically insignificant apart from one question, which failed to support the hypothesis of LGBTQ+ students having worse mental health condition than non-LGBTQ+ students. However, interview results illustrated presence of heteronormativity in schools in China, especially in traditional Chinese schools. Connection between heteronormative school environment and mental health of LGBTQ+ participants was demonstrated.

### *A. Peers*

Peers can be one of the critical factors that influence students' experience at school. When being asked about school environment, most interviewees ( $n = 13$ ) talked specifically about the influence peers have on them. They often determine their school environment's friendliness towards the LGBTQ+ community based on their peers' attitude on the subject, because they "spend the most time with their peers at school" (cis-gender male, bisexual, 16). A few students ( $n = 6$ ) mentioned that they have a "small group of friends" who were accepting and understanding, which was the fundamental reason why they feel positive towards the school environment. Majority of the students who mentioned having a supportive friend group ( $n = 5$ ) were only out to those friends, while remaining closeted to other peers at school.

On the other hand, there were also interviewees feeling negative towards their school environment because of their

peers. This was largely related with their classmates being queerphobic, so the participants have to keep themselves “closeted” at school. Bullying and discrimination upon LGBTQ+ identities were proved to enhance mental health issues including mental disorders, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and low self-esteem of LGBTQ+ youth by a number of past research [50-53]. Slurs and name-calling related to LGBTQ+ identities and gender expressions were also commonly described as a presentation of queerphobia in peers (n = 11), including words such as “sissy” “lady-boy” and “fag”. Slurs such as these were used on male students who displayed not enough masculine expression as criticism [11], promoting gender and sexual orientation stereotype. Peer queerphobia and name-calling were proved to have negative effects on mental health of LGBTQ+ teens by a number of literature [54-57]. They could be responsible for the uncomfortableness of LGBTQ+ students toward their identities. In the present study, an independent samples t-test on the relationship between gender identity and the extent to which participants felt comfortable about their gender identity showed that, off a five-point scale (one point for “very uncomfortable” and five points for “very comfortable”), cis-gender students (M = 4.15, SD = .89) felt more comfortable about their gender identity than gender queer students (M = 3.67, SD = .50),  $t(13) = 2.57, p = .023$ .

The causes of various peers’ attitudes were also brought up in the interviews. Many participants (n = 10) believed the lack or absence of intervention and education from schools and teachers on LGBTQ-related issues contributed to the problematic attitude of their peers. One of them explained that, since the school “doesn’t talk about things in relation with LGBTQ+ community at all”, students display queerphobic behaviour because “their source of information to the topic could only be social media and their peers, where queerphobia was quite commonly shown” (cis-gender male, homosexual, 18). Earlier studies have proved lack of teacher intervention in facilitating queerphobic behaviour from peers, as well teachers modeling LGBTQ-friendly behaviour and intervening name-calling in reducing queerphobia among students [58-60]. Without effective modeling and intervention from teachers, rare mentions of LGBTQ+ relations would be quickly stigmatized [19], so heteronormativity remained to be the dominant voice.

### *B. Parents*

Considering that queerphobia was in common place among Chinese parents, students emphasized the importance of having an accepting school environment as their safe space. Majority of the interviewees (n = 10) claimed that their parents have negative attitude towards LGBTQ+. Only 1 student out of 15 said his parents held a positive and accepting attitude for his LGBTQ+ identity. The rest of the students described their parents being “unable to understand anything in relation to LGBTQ+”, taking their identity as a “joke” or a “phase”, and refusing to “have conversation regarding LGBTQ+ issues”. This resulted in most students having to remain “closeted” in front of their parents and to deliberately avoid talking about or lie on their relationship status and love life. “Generational difference” was mentioned by the students, as one of them explained: “since there are more LGBTQ+ representation on social media these days, younger generation are more accepting towards the

community overall. This makes schools more likely to be LGBTQ-friendly compared to families, because there’s a lot of young people in schools.” (cis-gender female, bisexual, 17). This highlighted the importance of schools maintaining a LGBTQ-friendly environment to create a safe space that most Chinese LGBTQ+ students wouldn’t be able to attain at home.

### *C. Sexuality Education*

Heteronormativity in sexuality education was found to be a key factor for LGBTQ+ students’ school experience. Sexuality education was defined as education that “equips and empowers children and young people with information, skills and positive values to understand and enjoy their sexuality, have safe and fulfilling relationships and take responsibility for their own and other people’s sexual health and well-being” [61]. It was shown by a variety of literature that sexuality education affect adolescents positively by improving gender equality, reducing queerphobic abuse, and lowering suicide rate [62-65].

In this study, heteronormativity in sexuality education was found to be much more prevalent in traditional schools compared to in international schools. In this study, a total of 10 interviewees reported that they had received sexuality education on occasions such as class meetings and mental well-being sessions. The majority of these students were from international schools (n = 7). However, none of the participants mentioned inclusion of queer gender identity in content of sexuality education they participated in.

On the whole, interviewees from international schools described their schools as more LGBTQ-inclusive in sexuality education compared to those from traditional schools. However, another few participants felt that, although their schools included LGBTQ+ in the education, the content was too “brief” to leave any valuable impression. This showed that the schools still have space for improvement to make their course design more practically useful and impressive for students.

Although sexuality education was added to the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Minors in 2021, LGBTQ+ was not a part of the current curriculum. These attributed to variation in content and quality of teaching for sexuality education lessons. This explains why, although some international schools did provide LGBTQ-inclusive sexuality education, the education was not always effective to students.

On the other hand, students from traditional schools claimed that LGBTQ+ was only mentioned when HIV/AIDS was discussed in sexuality education. According to the participants, “sexual relation between men” was always introduced as a “major transmission route for HIV/AIDS”, but the reason behind such statement was never explained. According to UNESCO, sexuality education should be “comprehensive, accurate, evidence-informed” in its discussion of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS [66]. Only providing a brief statement to HIV/AIDS transmission by addressing a certain sexual relation but not elaborating on the biological factor behind it failed to fulfill the “comprehensive” requirement. This gap in information could account for gay students being stigmatized, bullied, and discriminated against at school, as explained by one participant:

Students don’t know that it is anal sex which accounts for the high risk, so they just believe being gay makes people ill

and that gay people should be avoided. So, saying someone having HIV/AIDS is saying they are gay, and saying someone is gay is saying that they have HIV/AIDS. That's why both "gay" and "HIV/AIDS" are used as insults at our school. (cis-gender male, bisexual, 17)

More than half of the students who talked about queerphobic name-calling mentioned names related to HIV/AIDS (n = 6). Based on previous discussion on name-calling, it can thus be argued that LGBTQ+ students, especially homosexual male students, under incomprehensive HIV/AIDS education would have greater risk of developing mental disorders compared to their cis-hetero peers.

Apart from HIV/AIDS, the rest of the content traditional school participants learnt in sexuality education were all based on cis-hetero context. This was argued by the participants to be responsible for the lack of understanding towards LGBTQ+. One interviewee said, "some of them [the classmates] don't even know LGBTQ+ community existed" (cis-gender male, pansexual, 18). Most traditional school interviewees (90%) directly expressed their hope for the schools to add LGBTQ-related content in sexuality education in future. Heteronormativity in sexuality education could lead to LGBTQ+ students feeling shameful, sexually unprepared, and invisible [67]. These could in turn expose LGBTQ+ students to higher mental and physical health risks.

To sum up, LGBTQ-inclusive sexuality education was found to be much more common among international schools than among traditional schools, despite education on gender identity was not included anywhere. Traditional schools only tended to mention LGBTQ+ in context of HIV/AIDS, but sufficient explanation was absent.

#### *D. Textbook and Teaching*

Outside of sexuality education, heteronormativity was also very common in textbooks the interviewees used and subject teaching they received. Only 2 out of 15 interviewees reported inclusion of LGBTQ+ in classes, both from international schools. Despite the inclusion, they were not satisfied with what they experienced. All LGBTQ+ representations they've seen at school were limited to homosexual men, leaving other identities (bisexual, lesbian, transgender, non-binary, etc.) completely unmentioned. Other than that, the gay representations were described as "highly stereotyped for gender expression" (cis-gender female, bisexual, 17) and were "poorly portrayed by teachers and peers" (cis-gender male, homosexual, 18). One participant explained that such stereotyped portrayal was "disrespectful and discriminatory", which made some students in the class feel "somehow uncomfortable".

Although international schools in China follow international curriculum such as IB, AP, and L-LEVEL, in which textbook of certain subjects do include LGBTQ-related topics (e.g., Sociology, English Literature), the teaching and interpretation of materials highly rely on teachers. Teachers have to depend on their personal understanding and knowledge for LGBTQ+ community when addressing these materials in class. This could lead to educators with poor gender awareness to approach LGBTQ+ issues inappropriately, resulting in uncomfortableness of LGBTQ+ students and allies.

Plus, no participant from traditional schools reported inclusion of LGBTQ+ in textbooks or teaching. One

participant explained that "teachers don't mention LGBTQ+ in class because they could get into trouble if the school or any parents know about it", because "homosexuality and transness are considered as harmful to students by Chinese parents and educational authorities" (cis-gender male, pansexual, 18). This reflected a similar trend to past literature on Chinese textbooks and educational regulations. In a study where Chinese university educators were interviewed, some participants claimed that they felt their ability to address LGBTQ+ issues were "constrained by having to adhere to the official textbooks and university regulations" [17], which aligned with the explanation provided by the student in the present study. GLCAC, a Chinese pro-LGBTQ+ NGO, did a study on textbooks Chinese universities use for mental health and psychology education [68]. Out of the 90 textbooks, around 41% described homosexuality as a "disease", and more than 50% suggested conversion therapy to be applied onto homosexual individuals. This supported the fact that Chinese textbooks used for high school and university students lacked diversity by either not including LGBTQ+ in discussion at all or spreading outdated misconceptions.

#### *E. School-Based Counseling Services*

Although school counseling was available in most schools of the interviewees, most interviewees had very limited knowledge on the service, even less had ever been counseled themselves. Heteronormativity and lack of professionalism were present in the counseling the interviewees experienced.

Having counseling service at school was supposed to provide more social support for LGBTQ+ students [69]. This support could aid LGBTQ+ youth in dealing with circumstances of discrimination and stress of coming out, which could lower their mental risks. However, the present study found that although 10 students (66.7%) claimed that their schools provide school-based psychological counseling to students, only 3 out of 10 have sought support from the counselors.

One reason for this could be the lack of understanding for school counseling services from school faculty. Students who had not tried school counseling in the present study explained that they had only heard of such service briefly for one or two times on occasions such as year assembly. This was consistent with a past study done on Chinese university professors. The study found that many Chinese university professors had inaccurate understanding of counseling, and therefore, were hesitant to recommend school counseling to their students [70]. Schools should educate their faculty on the usage and importance of counseling, so that teachers can suggest their students to visit school counseling more wisely and less hesitantly.

Another reason was misconceptions of counseling and stigma of mental illness [71]. When being asked why haven't try school counseling, a student responded that he believed counseling "was only for people who experienced extreme traumatic event like car crash or relatives passing away", while another student directly stated "because I don't have mental illness". Counseling was a relatively new concept in Chinese culture, so it would be the schools' responsibility to introduce students to counseling more thoroughly and clearly to remove the barriers and misunderstanding keeping them from seeking support.

In addition, presence of heteronormativity and misunderstanding of LGBTQ+ identity in school counselors were described by participants. Only 2 of the interviewees

have touched onto the topic of LGBTQ+ during counseling. Both students, however, described their experience as uncomfortable. The first student had his counselor assuming his male crush as “a girl” (cis-gender male, questioning, 18). He stopped visiting the school counselor after this incident because he “always felt awkward whenever I recall that one conversation”. This was an example of heteronormativity. Counselors assuming students’ sexual orientation as heterosexual would make LGBTQ+ students feel isolated and undiscovered, thus limiting their impulse to seek mental support, potentially worsening mental health condition of LGBTQ+ students. The second student described how her counselor considered her crush on a girl as “confusion” and insisted to say: “you don’t really like her like that, these feelings will disappear soon” (cis-gender female, bisexual, 17). The participant then said, “I really don’t think such thing would happen if I told her my crush was a boy instead”. Although this experience did not stop the participant from continuing to go to counseling, it kept her from sharing any concern on her love life and identity with the counselor. Selectively concealing LGBT-related issues could result in higher mental risk in LGBTQ+ students compared to their cis-hetero peers. In fact, the questionnaire result showed that all gender queer participants have had a depressed spell in their lifetime. All homosexual, asexual and non-binary participants have had a spell of feeling down in the past 12 months. Heteronormativity in attitude of school counselors could be a contributing factor to these findings.

Professionalism of school counselors in China was another issue raised. In the present study, only 3 participants said their schools recruited professional counselors to do the work. The other schools had form tutors, psychology teachers, or head of year to talk to students in need instead. This corresponded with past literature on Chinese school counselors. The Chinese government has not approved any official training program, certification, or accreditation for school counselors [72–74] found that only 34.8% of schools had school counselors with certification of mental health counselors or who had degrees in psychology. In fact, Chinese Qualification certificate of psychological counselor was canceled in 2017 along the removal of psychological counselor from Chinese National Directory of Vocational Qualifications. These factors called the professionalism of school counselors in question. The Chinese government and education authorities should establish reliable scheme for certification and training of school counselors to ensure quality of counseling students receive.

#### *F. Gendered Dress Code, School Policies, and Infrastructure*

Gendered dress code, school policies, and infrastructure interfered participants’ school experience, especially gender queer participants’. All interviewees who had attended traditional schools confirming presence of gendered school uniform. Uniforms were divided into menswear and womenswear, with no gender-neutral option. Several students described color difference between menswear and womenswear. Menswear was often of darker and more “masculine” color such black and dark blue, while womenswear was often lighter in color like white. Some schools had another formal uniform for flag raising ceremony

as well. Formal uniform had dresses or skirts for female students, and shorts or pants for male students. A non-binary student said: “I always chose menswear because I feel more comfortable in pants but wearing men’s uniform made people misgender me more conveniently.” Meanwhile, although several international school students mentioned presence of school uniform, the costumes were gender neutral and were of the same design for all students.

Plus, gendered dress code on hairstyle was present in schools of 5 interviewees, all of which were traditional schools. The most common hairstyle requirement was: “male students were not allowed to have long hair”. Students expressed their concern on this rule by addressing its limitation on gender expression and reinforcement of gender stereotype. This especially troubled gender queer students, as the non-binary interviewee explained: “Every time my teachers emphasized how it was important for boys to be ‘masculine’ by keeping their hair short, I felt very uncomfortable.” (non-binary, pansexual, 16)

These dress codes were heteronormative for their adherence on stereotyped gender expression and erasure of gender queer students. The stereotypical gender expressions for male and female matched the typical “straight girl look” and “straight boy look” described by Redelius, which would contribute to heteronormativity and potential alienation and bullying toward “non-straight” representing students. Such trend was also consistent with a recent study in which non-binary students expressed their feeling of isolation on the binary nature of school uniform and dress code [75].

To add onto this, all 3 gender queer interviewees stated that they experienced gendered division at school on a daily basis. All three interviewees expressed feelings of inconvenience, isolation, and invisibility from their experiences. None of the schools they attended had gender-neutral toilet. The two transgender students described attending PE lessons as “the most troublesome” because of the regular gender division involved. This included absence of gender-neutral changing room and separation of students into different PE classes by biological sex (boys and girls). A transgender student said her request of living on campus was rejected because the school “couldn’t find an appropriate place” for her (transgender female, pansexual, 15). Also, the non-binary student shared her thought on gender grouping during subject lessons:

There was one teacher of mine who was obsessed with this “boys vs girls quiz” thing. He always divided the class into two massive groups of “boys team” and “girls team”. Everyone pretending non-binary people don’t exist makes me feel so unfair. (non-binary, pansexual, 16)

Kassner found that transgender individuals were usually completely left out when speaking about gender[76]. Similarly, non-binary students might feel especially vulnerable and invisible in school environment because of their often-unrecognizable identity to others. These were consistent with the present study where all the binary design in schools assumed there were only two genders, and that the division was based on biological sex instead of gender identity. The continuous erasure of gender queer students would create a strong sense of isolation, increasing mental risk in the students. Schools in China should establish more gender-neutral policies and infrastructures to support gender

queer students.

## VI. CONCLUSION

From the interviews, heteronormativity was found to be present in peer interactions, sexuality education, textbook and teaching, school-based counseling services, dress code, school policies, and infrastructure. Aligned with past literature, the present study also found that heteronormative school environment affected LGBTQ+ students' mental health. Although school type was not the focus of the study, traditional schools were found to be more heteronormative than international schools in China. The survey data demonstrated that LGBTQ+ students felt less comfortable with their sexual orientation compared to their cis-hetero peers. This study can help education authorities adjust school policies and make school environments less heteronormative. Future research can focus on different school types in China to improve school experience of LGBTQ+ students.

## VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study might have a few limitations.

The method of the data collection might lead to a sampling bias. For the questionnaire, because the respondents were recruited voluntarily via an e-poster with the keyword "mental health" shown, those who decided to participate could be having more concerns with their mental health issues compared to those who did not participate at the first place. Likewise, interviewees were also recruited via volunteer sampling, so there was possibility that students who signed up for interviews had school experiences they think were personally impressive, emotionally significant, or were different from non-LGBTQ+ students. These could indicate that LGBTQ+ students who did not signed up for the interviews had nothing remarkable to share about their school experience, thus only students with more extreme school experience were included in this study.

Future studies should consider using methods other than random sampling to lower bias involved.

Secondly, the questionnaire participants happened to be gender biased. With using volunteer sampling, no restrictions were applied on the number of participants for each gender. More than 70% of the respondents were cis-gender female, while less than 10% were gender queer. A larger sample size can be ideal for more accurate and reliable data to compensate the gap in proportion of different gender groups. Considering that the current sample size was 116, gender queer population was underrepresented, and the results were too insignificant to be generalized to a larger population. Similarly, because there were seven types of sexual orientation used to label the participants, some had only one or two participants using the label, differentiation between groups were affected and statistical significance was influenced. Future studies should use a larger sample size if there's need to analyze difference between various types of gender or sexual orientation groups, especially when including labels that were minority in number compared to other groups (e.g., transgender versus cis-gender).

Future research can focus on heteronormativity in different types of schools. Participants from traditional schools and

international schools were found to have very different school experiences, thus had different concerns depending on which education system they were in. It would be helpful to compare LGBTQ+ school experiences under different school systems in future investigations for suggestions of improvements on each system.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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