

# The Relationship between Gender Stereotype and Self-esteem of Chinese College Students

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## ABSTRACT

Gender stereotype and self-esteem are two important psychological factors that can influence college students' well-being. This study uses a questionnaire to investigate the basic situation and relationships between gender stereotypes and self-esteem of Chinese college students. The results show that there is no significant correlation between the level of self-esteem of college students and gender stereotypes all over the country. The gender stereotypes of college students are affected to some extent by factors such as gender, age, and birthplace.

**Keywords:** Gender stereotypes; self-esteem; college students

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotypes refer to people's inherent impressions of the characteristics of male or female roles. It expresses people's expectations and views on gender roles [1]. With the continuous development of society, the status of women has constantly been improving. Still, this phenomenon does not mean that the awareness of equality between men and women has been improved [2]. According to Berk's research, parents tend to wear girls in pink and treat girls more mildly, while they tend to wear boys in blue and treat them more strictly [3]. Under the influence of social culture, the differentiation of gender attributes in China is more prominent than in the West. For example, males are required to be "independent, confident, controlling, and competitive." However, females must be "passive, humble, docile, and loyal." Since childhood, adolescents have accepted the traditional concept of gender roles and formed stereotypes of different gender [4]. Although some adolescents' gender stereotypes do not necessarily determine their own gender role identity in personality, occupation, and behavior, they more or less affect their social adaptability and mental health [5].

Self-esteem is one of the most prominent and essential characteristics of college students. It is a protective factor for youth's mental health [6]. The empirical research conducted by Gao taking Chinese

college students as samples shows that self-esteem is an essential factor influencing college students' mental health. It has a significant predictive effect on college students' depression, anxiety, and interpersonal sensitivity [7]. Scholars who have researched self-esteem from the perspective of age development found that, although self-esteem from middle school to college has risen, there are violent fluctuations. It drops sharply in the third year of high school and quickly rises to the highest point in the junior year of college [8]. Empirical studies in China have confirmed gender differences in self-esteem, and males' level of self-esteem is higher than females'. However, unlike the Western results, the gender difference in self-esteem changes with age. In the high school stage, the self-esteem of girls is higher than that of males, and then the self-esteem of males is gradually surpasses that of females [9].

Studies have shown that due to the massive influence of gender role stereotypes, when an individual's behavior does not match the gender role stereotypes, the social expectations of gender roles will form pressure, which will affect people's physical and mental health [10]. As one of the critical mental health factors, self-esteem may be affected by it. The current domestic researches on self-esteem and gender stereotypes have found that self-esteem role models play a moderating role in reducing the impact of the threat of stereotypes. There is a strong stereotype threat effect for individuals with high self-

esteem, but providing example information will reduce the threat effect. For individuals with low self-esteem, role models have no impact on the threat of stereotypes [11]. Under the subliminal death reminder operation, the explicit and implicit gender stereotypes of the high-trait self-esteem subjects were significantly lower than those of the low-trait self-esteem subjects [12].

Regarding the stereotypes of the opposite sex's mate choice appearance, men with high self-esteem are more active than women with high self-esteem and men with low self-esteem [13]. Although researchers have explored the relationship between self-esteem and gender stereotypes from different aspects, few people have directly examined the relationship between them. This study takes Chinese college students as the research object and uses empirical research methods to explore the correlation between the two elements, the purpose is to determine whether self-esteem is really associated with the level of gender stereotyping among Chinese college students, and how this affects it. It is of positive significance to fill up the research gaps in this area and explore ways to improve the mental health of college students.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

### 2.1 Subjects

This study used a questionnaire method to distribute online questionnaires to 183 college students nationwide and retrieve them. Excluding the questionnaires that took too little time to fill in and had irregular answers, 157 valid questionnaires were collected (recovery rate 85.79%). Among the valid samples, 92 were from women (58.6%), and 65 were from men (41.4%). They all had a bachelor's degree or above.

The descriptive statistical results of the subjects' gender, grade, family, birthplace, love experience, etc., are shown in Table 1. Among the subjects, female students from the sophomore year are the majority with about 21.66%; the subjects mainly were from two-parent families and were born in cities and towns; 60.51% of subjects were female subjects who were only children, but not only children. It accounts for 27.39%, close to the only-child male subjects (29.30%); 21.02% of the subjects have no dating experience, and 9.55% of the subjects have four or more romantic adventures.

**Table 1.** Details of subjects

Gender	Grade				Family			Birth place			Whether they have brothers or sisters					Love experience	
	freshman	sophomore	junior	senior	graduate	single parent	two parents	city	towns	village	yes	no	0	1	2	3	4+
male	11	15	24	11	4	8	57	33	23	9	46	19	12	18	19	8	8
proportion	7.01	9.55	15.29	7.01	2.55	5.10	36.31	21.02	14.65	5.73	29.30	12.10	7.64	11.46	12.10	5.10	5.10
female	6	34	32	9	11	12	80	46	27	19	49	43	21	27	29	8	7
proportion	3.82	21.66	20.38	5.73	7.01	7.64	50.96	29.30	17.20	12.10	31.21	27.39	13.38	17.20	18.47	5.10	4.46
grand total	17	49	56	20	15	20	137	79	50	28	95	62	33	45	48	16	15
proportion	10.83	31.21	35.67	12.74	9.55	12.74	87.26	50.32	31.58	17.83	60.51	39.49	21.02	28.66	30.57	10.19	9.55

### 2.2 Research tools

#### 2.2.1 Gender stereotype scale for adolescents

This study adopted the Gender Stereotype Scale for Adolescents, compiled by Liu and Zuo [14]. The scale was compiled from research by foreign scholars on stereotype factors (Deaux, 1983) and consists of four parts [15]. The first part describes the gender characteristics, the second part describes the behavior, the third part describes the occupation, and the fourth part describes the appearance. The scale goes from 1 "perfectly male" to 5 "perfectly female." The closer the score is to 1 or 5, the higher the gender stereotype of the

participant. The scale is specifically designed for the characteristics of Chinese adolescents and has high reliability and validity.

#### 2.2.2 Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale

Rosenberg originally developed the Self-Esteem Scale (SES) in 1965 to assess adolescents' overall feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance. The SES is currently the most widely used self-esteem measure in Chinese psychology [16]. The scale consists of 10 items, divided into five positive scoring questions and five reverse scoring questions. On a 4-point scale, the participant

selects the option that best fits their needs, with options ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely" on a scale of 1 to 4. The higher the score, the higher the level of self-esteem of the subjects.

**2.3 Data processing**

The process employed SPSS 23.0 to collate and analyze the data collected and used descriptive statistics and correlation analysis as a method of data analysis to conduct correlation research on the collected data.

**3. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

**3.1 Descriptive statistics results**

As shown in Table 2, the average value of the subjects' self-esteem is 2.996, with a minimum value of 2.77 and a maximum value of 3.23, which is a high level of overall self-esteem. In terms of stereotypes, the subjects had the lowest value of 2.7590 and the highest value of 4.1826 in the male behavior dimension and female personality trait dimension, respectively, with more profound gender stereotypes in these two dimensions. The average value for the male occupational dimension is also closest to 3, and gender stereotypes in terms of occupation are less than in other comparisons.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistical results of self-esteem and gender stereotypes

	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard deviation
Self-Esteem	2.77	3.23	2.996	.15266
Male personality trait dimension	1.11	5.00	3.2392	.98991
Female personality trait dimension	1.11	5.56	4.1826	.85587
Male behavior dimension	1.00	5.00	2.7580	1.30163
Female behavior dimension	1.00	5.00	3.8328	.83368
Male occupation dimension	1.00	5.00	3.0650	1.11980
Female occupation dimension	1.00	5.00	3.7516	.95364
Male appearance dimension	1.00	5.00	2.9083	1.31139
Female appearance dimension	1.00	5.00	3.9452	.85982

**3.2 Relevance studies**

Correlation analysis of self-esteem and gender stereotypes resulted only in  $r=0.61$  ( $p > 0.05$ ) between the male appearance dimension and the self-esteem scale, showing that the correlation between self-esteem and gender stereotypes was not significant, indicating that

there was no significant correlation between the two. When demographic factors such as gender, age, and place of origin are tested for correlations with self-esteem and gender stereotypes, the results show significant correlations between emotional experience and female personality traits, age, gender, and male behavior and female occupational dimensions, and place of origin and male behavior dimensions at  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 3.** Correlation between self-esteem and gender stereotypes

		Male		Female				
		personality trait	personality trait	Male behavior dimension	Female behavior dimension	Male occupation dimension	Female occupation dimension	
		Self-Esteem dimension						
R	Self-Esteem	1.000	-.072	-.115	-.018	.030	.049	-.010
	Male personality trait dimension	-.072	1.000	.455	.634	-.001	.483	-.074
	female personality trait dimension	-.115	.455	1.000	.200	.358	.121	.291
	Male behavior dimension	-.018	.634	.200	1.000	.305	.544	.010

	Female behavior dimension	.030	-.001	.358	.305	1.000	.115	.382
	Male occupation dimension	.049	.483	.121	.544	.115	1.000	.315
	Female occupation dimension	-.010	-.074	.291	.010	.382	.315	1.000
	Male appearance dimension	.061	.520	.100	.691	.054	.553	-.107
	Male appearance dimension	-.023	-.093	.156	-.010	.323	-.135	.278
	Grade	.037	-.044	-.051	-.099	.000	-.162	-.222
	Love experience family	-.090	.017	.153	-.012	.137	.038	.100
	Whether they have brothers or sisters	-.001	-.122	.017	-.178	.025	-.131	.055
	Gender	.025	-.099	-.061	-.147	.076	.070	.148
	Birth place	-.005	.186	.024	.166	.000	.038	-.066
P	Self-Esteem	.	.183	.075	.412	.355	.271	.449
	male personality trait dimension	.183	.	.000	.000	.495	.000	.179
	female personality trait dimension	.075	.000	.	.006	.000	.066	.000
	Male behavior dimension	.412	.000	.006	.	.000	.000	.452
	Female behavior dimension	.355	.495	.000	.000	.	.076	.000
	Male occupation dimension	.271	.000	.066	.000	.076	.	.000
	Female occupation dimension	.449	.179	.000	.452	.000	.000	.
	Male appearance dimension	.225	.000	.107	.000	.252	.000	.091
	Female appearance dimension	.386	.123	.025*	.451	.000	.046*	.000
	Grade	.323	.294	.263	.108	.499	.021*	.003*
	Love experience family	.130	.418	.028*	.440	.044*	.318	.107
		.179	.090	.054	.223	.489	.375	.195

Whether they have brothers or sisters	.494	.063	.416	.013*	.376	.051	.248
Gender	.490	.181	.481	.021*	.184	.058	.007*
Birth place	.379	.108	.224	.033*	.172	.193	.032*
Grade	.475	.010*	.383	.019*	.499	.316	.206

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The results of the data study indicate that gender stereotypes do still exist in the university student population, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies. Stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are exhibited regardless of the gender of the subjects. Particularly in the behavioral and personality dimensions, subjects tend to be more likely to associate with men when behaviors such as fighting to resolve conflicts, watching football matches, or smoking in the corridor are present. Whereas when qualities such as dependence, weakness, gentleness, and kindness are mentioned, subjects are more inclined to associate them with women. The findings of this study suggest that traditional gender roles are still influential among university students. On another side, the subjects' gender stereotypes in the career dimension are relatively low. They tend to believe that even women could take up careers as political leaders, philosophers, entrepreneurs, engineers, etc. This may be related to the fact that more and more women are moving into the workforce and that positions traditionally held by men are gradually becoming more gender diverse.

The results of the data study show that there is no significant correlation between self-esteem and gender stereotypes. The moderating effect of self-esteem is not evident in this study, which is not consistent with the findings of previous studies. In Li's study, the stereotypical image of college students' mate choice differed across self-esteem and is influenced by gender. This is evidenced by the fact that the level of self-esteem among men impacts their stereotypical image of appearance, with men with high self-esteem having a more favorable stereotype of the opposite sex [17]. The inconsistent findings may be that the former study participants are recruited from three universities in Guizhou through voluntary recruitment and re-screening, removing the influence of factors such as homosexuality and enrollment in a psychology major. In contrast, the subjects in this study are selected from university students in colleges and universities across the country, which is more widespread in terms of region. The subjects do not have a vital purpose in participating in the questionnaire. Whether there is a correlation between self-esteem and gender stereotypes at a national level

needs further research.

This study finds that factors such as gender, age, and place of origin did correlate with gender stereotypes. Research both national and international has shown that boys hold more stereotypical gender stereotypes than girls at any stage of adolescence [18]. This may be related to boys being brought up to behave in a masculine manner and are held to a higher social expectation. Although girls also have gender stereotypes, they are less affected as they become more educated and more self-aware [19]. This shows that attention to gender stereotypes of gender differences, active gender education, and helping young people to self-regulate are still important issues in youth education today.

There are also some deficiencies in this study. Due to limited resources and time, more samples could not be collected for research. At the same time, the data processing is rough and some irrelevant variables are not removed, which affects the accuracy of the data. Besides, the relationship between explicit self-esteem level and gender stereotype is mainly explored, while implicit self-esteem level is not involved. In the future, studies can further explore the effects of different combinations of implicit and explicit self-esteem on gender stereotypes and the differences in the effects of self-esteem on gender stereotypes under different genders, excluding the influence of irrelevant variables.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that the self-esteem levels of Chinese college students do not appear to be significantly correlated with gender stereotypes, which do not match expectations. This may be related to the selection of this sample, which comes from a wide range of sources, from different regions and schools in China, which may have an impact on the data results. In subsequent studies, the subjects can be selected from specific universities, and different control groups can be set from them to further explore the correlation between implicit and explicit self-esteem on gender stereotypes, as well as the gender differences between men and women. This can further explore the impact of self-esteem levels on people's cognition and behavior, and the role of gender in it. The study also shows that even as we enter the new year, there are still deep gender stereotypes

among college students who have received higher education. In the future, there is still a long way to go to explore how schools can better carry out gender education and mental health care for adolescents.

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