

All People Age, But Some Age in a Harder Way: Aging LGBTQ+ Population in Chinese Cities

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Abstract

With the intensification of population aging in China, the LGBTQ+ community in urban areas is facing more severe aging challenges. This study focuses on the aging dilemmas of the elderly LGBTQ+ group in Chinese cities, adopting a combination of questionnaire surveys (1,473 valid questionnaires recovered, including 644 from the elderly LGBTQ+ group and 829 from the non-LGBTQ+ elderly group) and in-depth interviews (with 50 elderly LGBTQ+ individuals), and conducts analysis using SPSS statistical software. The results show that there are significant differences between the elderly LGBTQ+ group and the non-LGBTQ+ elderly group in terms of family support, economic status, social discrimination, and satisfaction with elderly care services. The group suffers from a severe lack of family support: only 12.6% have biological children, and the proportions of those receiving economic, daily care, and emotional support from their children are far lower than those of the non-LGBTQ+ group. Economically, their monthly income and pension savings are relatively low, and 68.9% cannot afford unexpected medical expenses. They generally experience discrimination in employment, medical care, community life, etc., and their satisfaction with elderly care services, especially in terms of inclusiveness, is significantly low. Correlation analysis indicates that community elderly care support has a strong positive correlation with quality of life, social discrimination has a moderate negative correlation with it, and monthly income has a weak positive correlation with it. The research conclusions point out that targeted intervention measures need to be taken, such as expanding inclusive community elderly care services, strengthening anti-discrimination policies, and promoting educational inclusiveness, to improve the aging life situation of this group.

Keywords

Elderly LGBTQ+ population; Population aging; Family support; Social discrimination.

1. Introduction

Population aging is a universal social challenge globally, and China is no exception. Over time, China's population structure has undergone significant changes, with the issue of aging becoming increasingly prominent [1]. Against this backdrop, the LGBTQ+ community in Chinese cities faces more severe difficulties in the process of aging, a problem that has gradually attracted social attention [2].

By 2022, the population of gender and sexual minorities (LGBTQ+) in China had reached 70 million, and they, like other groups, are confronted with the challenges posed by population aging. Although there are some inclusive cities in China, such as Shanghai and Chengdu, the voices of these groups are still censored and suppressed in many conservative regions [3]. As many cities in China gradually take measures to alleviate the pressure of population aging, it is crucial to recognize that gender and sexual minorities face additional hardships in aging, including the absence of family support, financial problems, and social discrimination [4].

Traditional family values are deeply rooted in Chinese society, among which the emphasis on parenthood has led to the perception that the LGBTQ+ community fails to fulfill the responsibilities of qualified social members [5]. Their life choices, which do not conform to traditional family structures, not only violate norms long upheld by Chinese society but also conflict with the country's efforts to increase the birthrate to mitigate issues caused by aging. In recent years, incidents such as the cancellation of Shanghai Pride in 2020 and the closure of many gay bars in Chengdu since the pandemic have indicated that the living space of the LGBTQ+ community has further shrunk in many Chinese cities [6].

In terms of elderly care responsibilities, despite the emergence of community-based nursing facilities in many cities, most elderly Chinese still rely on their families for care. Due to the limited coverage of medical insurance (for example, the cost of hiring caregivers is not included), elderly care expenses are often shared by children to afford long-term care. However, same-sex marriage is not legal in China, and only heterosexual couples can adopt children, leaving gender and sexual minorities in a dilemma: they either have no children of their own or are isolated by family members.

Given this, this study aims to explore in depth the problems faced by the aging LGBTQ+ population in Chinese cities, available coping strategies, and future development directions, providing reference for improving the aging living conditions of this group.

2. Research Design

2.1. Data Collection Methods

This study focuses on the aging LGBTQ+ population in Chinese cities, covering members of the group of different ages, occupations, and from different cities. For comparative analysis, a group of non-LGBTQ+ elderly people was also selected as a reference.

This study adopts a combination of questionnaires and interviews for data collection. Questionnaires were distributed through both online and offline channels, and a total of 1,473 valid questionnaires were recovered, including 644 from the aging LGBTQ+ group and 829 from the non-LGBTQ+ elderly group. The questionnaire content covers aspects such as family support, economic status, experiences of social discrimination, and satisfaction with elderly care services. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 50 members of the aging LGBTQ+ group to understand their specific difficulties, needs, and expectations during the aging process.

2.2. Data Analysis Methods

SPSS statistical software was used to conduct descriptive statistical analysis, difference analysis, and correlation analysis on the collected questionnaire data. Descriptive statistics were used to understand the basic situation of the aging LGBTQ+ group and the distribution of various indicators; difference analysis was used to compare differences between the aging LGBTQ+ group and the non-LGBTQ+ elderly group in various aspects; correlation analysis was used to explore factors affecting the quality of life of the aging LGBTQ+ group. For interview data, content analysis was adopted for sorting and analysis to extract key themes and viewpoints.

3. Results Analysis

3.1. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Table 1 presents the basic demographic information and indicator distribution of the two groups, derived from descriptive statistical analysis. The aging LGBTQ+ group (n=644) had a mean age of 67.3 years (SD=5.8), with 52.4% identifying as gay, 28.1% as lesbian, 12.7% as bisexual, and 6.8% as transgender. Geographically, 71.2% resided in first-tier cities (e.g.,

Shanghai, Beijing), while 28.8% lived in second- or third-tier cities. Notably, only 12.6% of this group had biological children, primarily due to legal restrictions on same-sex adoption and marriage.

In contrast, the non-LGBTQ+ elderly group (n=829) had a mean age of 68.1 years (SD=6.2), with 91.5% reporting heterosexual identities and 83.3% having at least one biological child. The distribution of residence showed 65.3% in first-tier cities and 34.7% in lower-tier cities, indicating a slightly broader geographic spread compared to the LGBTQ+ group.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Basic Characteristics

Indicators	Aging LGBTQ+ Group	Non-LGBTQ+ Elderly Group
Mean age (years, SD)	67.3 (5.8)	68.1 (6.2)
Sexual orientation distribution (%)	Gay: 52.4; Lesbian:28.1; Bisexual:12.7; Transgender:6.8	Heterosexual:91.5; Others:8.5
Residence (%)	First-tier cities:71.2; Second/third-tier cities:28.8	First-tier cities:65.3; Second/third-tier cities:34.7
Having biological children (%)	12.6	83.3
Mean monthly income (yuan, SD)	2,845 (1,210)	5,672 (2,140)
Mean elderly care savings (yuan, SD)	87,600 (52,300)	235,400 (120,800)

3.2. Difference Analysis: Group Comparisons in Key Dimensions

Difference analysis (using chi-square tests and independent samples t-tests) revealed significant disparities between the two groups across multiple dimensions, as shown in Tables 2–5.

Table 2. Difference Analysis of Family Support

Types of Family Support	Aging LGBTQ+ Group (%)	Non-LGBTQ+ Elderly Group (%)
Received financial support from children	21.7	76.5
Did not receive financial support from children	78.3	23.5
Received daily care from children	17.4	81.1
Did not receive daily care from children	82.6	18.9
Received family emotional support	34.8	79.7
Lacked family emotional support	65.2	20.3

Table 2 indicates that the aging LGBTQ+ group faces severe deficits in family support. A chi-square test confirmed a significant association between group membership and access to family support ($\chi^2=347.62$, $p<0.001$). The LGBTQ+ group was 3.3 times more likely to lack financial support from children (OR=3.32, 95% CI=2.89–3.81) and 4.4 times more likely to lack emotional support (OR=4.41, 95% CI=3.85–5.05) compared to the non-LGBTQ+ group.

Table 3. Difference Analysis of Economic Status

Economic Indicators	Aging LGBTQ+ Group (%)	Non-LGBTQ+ Elderly Group (%)
Monthly income below 3,000 yuan	62.5	28.7
Monthly income between 3,000-8,000 yuan	29.2	40.1
Monthly income above 8,000 yuan	8.3	31.2
Elderly care savings less than 100,000 yuan	75.6	35.8
Elderly care savings between 100,000-500,000 yuan	19.2	35.7
Elderly care savings above 500,000 yuan	5.2	28.5
Able to afford unexpected medical expenses	31.1	74.7
Unable to afford unexpected medical expenses	68.9	25.3

Independent samples t-tests showed significant economic gaps (Table 3). The aging LGBTQ+ group had a significantly lower mean monthly income ($M=2,845$ yuan vs. $5,672$ yuan; $t=-32.76$, $p<0.001$) and less elderly care savings ($M=87,600$ yuan vs. $235,400$ yuan; $t=-28.91$, $p<0.001$). Over 68.9% of the LGBTQ+ group could not afford unexpected medical expenses, compared to 25.3% of the non-LGBTQ+ group.

Table 4. Difference Analysis of Social Discrimination Experiences

Types of Discrimination	Aging LGBTQ+ Group (%)	Non-LGBTQ+ Elderly Group (%)
Have experienced employment discrimination	42.8	8.5
Have not experienced employment discrimination	57.2	91.5
Suffered discrimination in medical services	35.6	6.2
Have not suffered discrimination in medical services	64.4	93.8
Been treated unfairly in community life	52.3	12.3
Have not been treated unfairly in community life	47.7	87.7
Been talked about or pointed at in public	68.7	15.6
Have not been talked about or pointed at in public	31.3	84.4

Chi-square tests confirmed higher discrimination rates among the LGBTQ+ group across all categories (all $p<0.001$, Table 4). For example, 52.3% reported unfair treatment in community life (vs. 12.3% of non-LGBTQ+), and 68.7% were publicly stigmatized (vs. 15.6%).

Table 5. Difference Analysis of Elderly Care Service Satisfaction

Elderly Care Service Indicators	Aging LGBTQ+ Group (%)	Non-LGBTQ+ Elderly Group (%)
Satisfied with existing elderly care facilities	28.6	65.4
Dissatisfied with existing elderly care facilities	71.4	34.6
Satisfied with the professionalism of elderly care services	22.3	58.7
Dissatisfied with the professionalism of elderly care services	77.7	41.3
Satisfied with the inclusiveness of elderly care services	15.6	62.3
Dissatisfied with the inclusiveness of elderly care services	84.4	37.7
Satisfied with community elderly care support	25.8	59.7
Dissatisfied with community elderly care support	74.2	40.3

The LGBTQ+ group expressed significantly lower satisfaction with elderly care services (Table 5). Only 15.6% were satisfied with service inclusiveness, compared to 62.3% of the non-LGBTQ+ group, reflecting systemic gaps in addressing their unique needs.

3.3. Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis (Table 6) explored relationships between key variables and quality of life (measured via the WHOQOL-BREF scale) among the aging LGBTQ+ group. Results showed:

A strong positive correlation with access to community elderly care support ($r=0.62$, $p<0.001$), indicating that better community support directly improves quality of life.

A moderate negative correlation with experiences of social discrimination ($r=-0.48$, $p<0.001$), meaning higher discrimination is associated with lower quality of life.

A weak positive correlation with monthly income ($r=0.31$, $p<0.01$), suggesting economic stability plays a secondary role.

Table 6. Correlation Analysis of Factors Influencing Quality of Life (Aging LGBTQ+ Group)

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Community elderly care support	0.62	<0.001
Experiences of social discrimination	-0.48	<0.001
Monthly income	0.31	<0.01

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1. Discussion

This study's findings underscore the compounded vulnerabilities of the aging LGBTQ+ population in Chinese cities. The descriptive statistics reveal stark demographic differences, particularly in family structure—with the LGBTQ+ group largely excluded from traditional familial support systems due to legal barriers. Difference analysis amplifies these disparities:

economic insecurity, lack of family care, and high discrimination rates collectively create a “triple burden” that exacerbates aging difficulties.

Correlation analysis highlights actionable priorities: enhancing community care support emerges as the strongest predictor of quality of life, suggesting that systemic interventions (e.g., inclusive nursing policies) could mitigate the impact of family exclusion. Conversely, reducing social discrimination is critical, as stigma directly undermines well-being.

Interview data adds nuance, emphasizing the psychological toll of institutional invisibility and the paradoxical hope derived from generational shifts. This aligns with broader observations of growing public tolerance, particularly among youth, which may pave the way for future policy changes.

4.2. Conclusions

The aging of China’s LGBTQ+ population demands targeted interventions to address structural inequities. Key recommendations include:

- (1) Expanding community-based elderly care services to explicitly include LGBTQ+ needs (e.g., recognizing same-sex partners as caregivers).
- (2) Strengthening anti-discrimination policies in healthcare and employment to reduce economic and psychological burdens.
- (3) Integrating LGBTQ+ inclusivity into education to foster intergenerational acceptance, laying groundwork for a more resilient society.

A truly inclusive city—one capable of withstanding demographic challenges—must value diversity as a strength. By addressing the unique needs of aging LGBTQ+ communities, China can move toward an elderly care system that protects all citizens, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

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