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It's not a phase mom: How Parental Acceptance Influences Long Term Well Being for Sexual and Gender Minorities

Jonathan Gaughan

Binghamton University--SUNY

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“It’s not a phase mom”:

How Parental Acceptance Influences Long Term Well Being for Sexual and Gender Minorities

Jonathan Gaughan

Mentors: Sarah Young, Sean Massey, Ann Merriwether, & Melissa Hardesty



Abstract

Disclosure of sexual and/or gender minority status, or “coming out”, is often an important step for sexual and gender minorities (SGM) that, along with components of familial acceptance such as support, discussion, and expression of affection, are critical in identity formation. While many studies have examined the harms of familial rejection on emerging SGM adults, few studies have examined the possible benefits of family acceptance. Our study examined the influence of SGM’s reported levels of accepting parental behaviors in regards to self-image, sexual satisfaction, and outlook on relationships which may have far-reaching implications for long-term health and happiness of emerging SGM adults.

Background

Coming out is a developmental experience that is carefully calculated and often occurs during the emerging adulthood period of an individual’s life (18-25 years old). SGM individuals experience a variable level of acceptance or rejection from their family due to their newly disclosed identity which is referred to as family acceptance. Consistent with Bowlby’s theory of attachment, the relationship that many individuals have with their mother and/or father results in additional importance being placed on the accepting/rejecting behaviors exhibited by an individual’s parents (Katz-Wise, 2016).

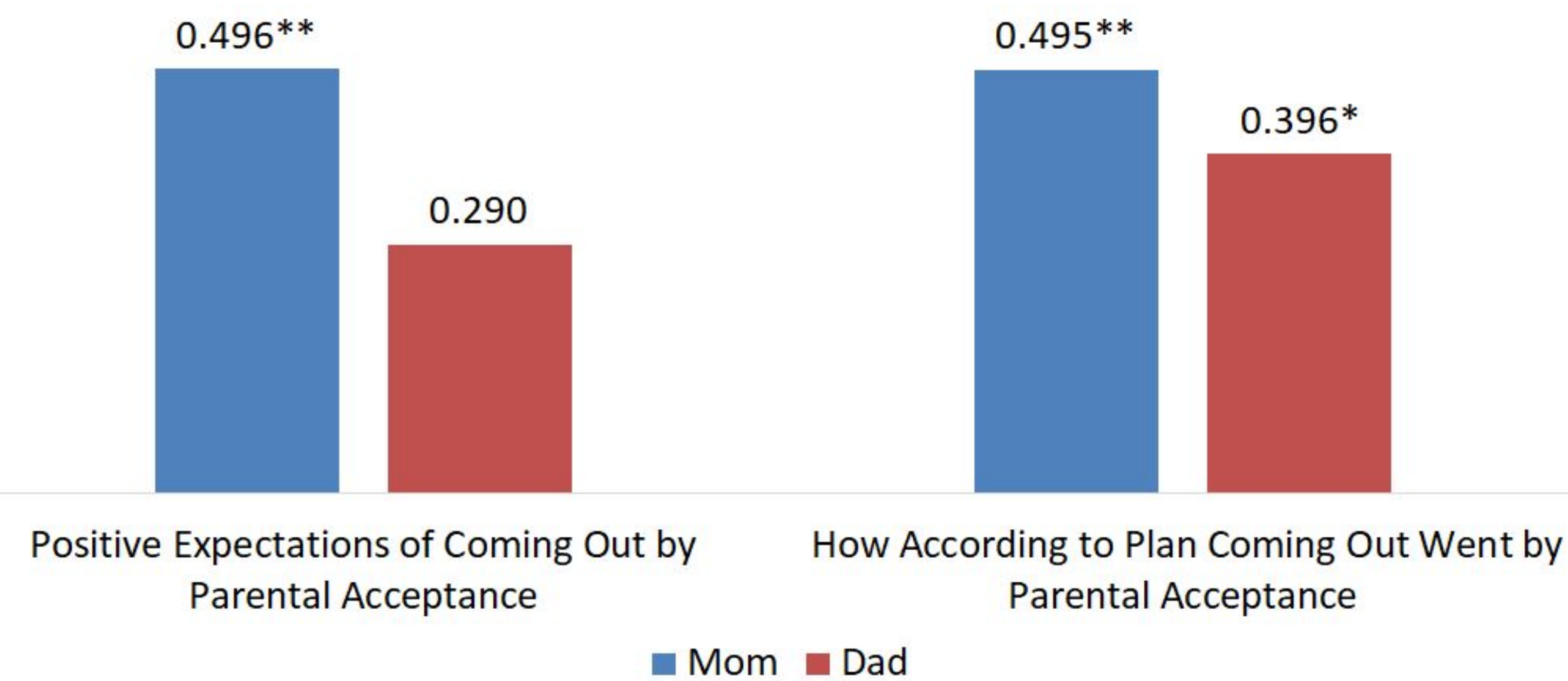
There is an established association between rejecting familial behaviors and negative health outcomes such as depression, attempted suicide, illicit drug use, and engagement in unprotected sex. However, less research has focused on the possible links between accepting familial behaviors and the long term health and happiness of SGM individuals. Examples of accepting parental behaviors include showing affection for an LGBTQ-identified child, support the identity of an LGBTQ-identified child, and talking with an LGBTQ-identified child about their identity. These described accepting behaviors have a part to play in elements of identity formation and have illustrated links to positive health outcomes such as self-esteem, social support, and general health (Ryan, 2010).

Hypotheses

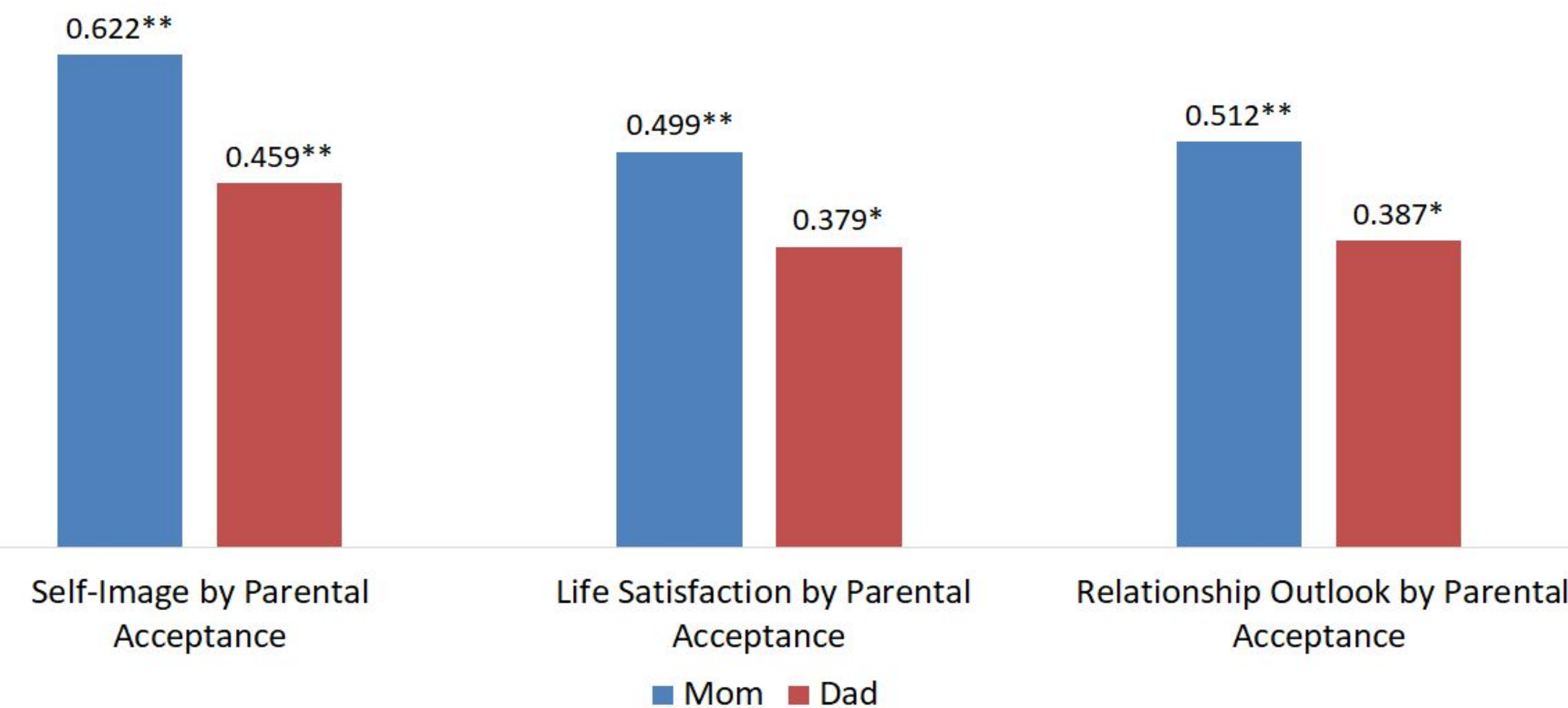
- 1.) Higher levels of parental acceptance will result in a positive influence on a SGM individual’s self-image, life satisfaction, and outlook on sex and relationships.
- 2.) Non-SGM individuals will hypothesize a lower level of parental acceptance compared to the level of parental acceptance reported by SGM individuals.

Results

Correlation between parental acceptance and SGM participant's positive expectations for coming out and how according to plan coming out went

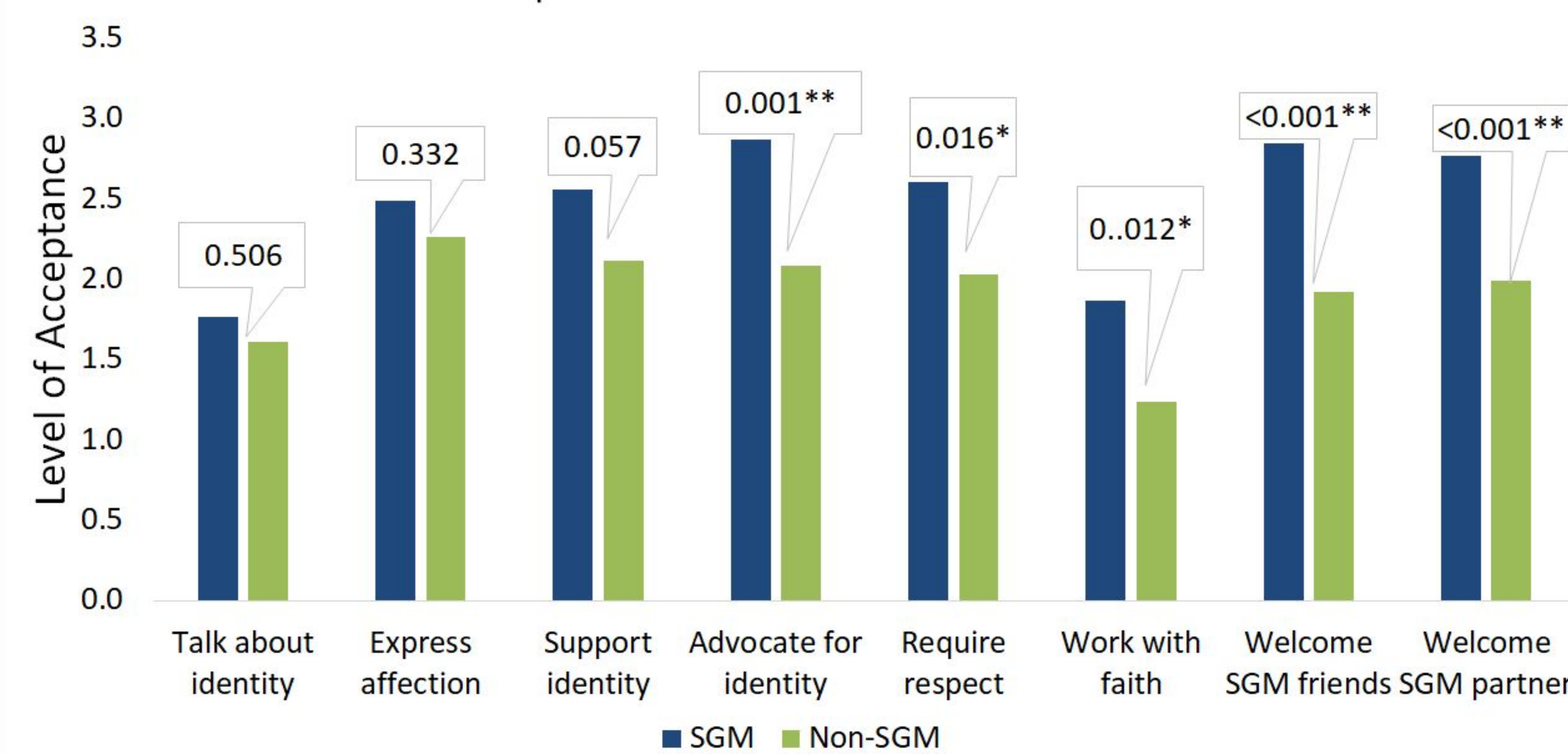


Correlation between parental acceptance and SGM participant’s self-image, life satisfaction, and relationship outlook



**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) | *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Parental Acceptance for SGM and Non-SGM individuals



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Methods

Participants were Binghamton Undergraduate students that completed an online survey. SGM status was denoted using the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) and self-reported gender.

Total Participants	SGM	Non-SGM
375	48	327

1. SGM individuals were asked, “how according to plan” their coming out experience went, and if the experience was “more positive or more negative than your expectations” which was compared to the way that their parent treated them (accepted/rejected) after they came out.
2. SGM individuals were asked about the influence that their parents had on their self-image, overall satisfaction in life, and their outlook on sex and relationships which was compared to parental acceptance.
3. Using a variation of the family acceptance matrix we compared the level of acceptance/rejection reported by SGM individuals to the imagined levels of acceptance/rejection of non-SGM individuals.

Discussion

There was a positive correlation between the expected positivity and “how according to plan” the overall coming out experience went and the level of maternal acceptance; the positive expectation correlation was not observed for paternal acceptance (top graph). Possible implications for these results include the idea that expectation prior to coming out may predict an individual’s parental response. Additionally, an individual’s self-image, overall satisfaction in life, and outlook on sex and relationships were positively correlated with the level of maternal and paternal acceptance. This correlation supports hypothesis 1 and is illustrated in the middle graph. These results suggest that components of the overall health and happiness can be positively influenced when parents of SGM individuals choose accepting behaviors in response to their child’s coming out as opposed to rejecting behaviors. The gender difference between maternal acceptance and paternal acceptance may due to do differences in parental gender roles.

There were significant differences observed in some of the accepting behaviors between SGM and non-SGM individuals which supports hypothesis 2 (bottom graph). The differences in perceived level of acceptance could explain differing expectations between non-SGM parents and their SGM children.

This experiment was a pilot for future studies that will continue to examine the effects of family acceptance on emerging SGM adults. Limitations within this study include a small SGM sample size and future studies will include a more sexually diverse subject pool.

References

Katz-Wise, SL. et al. (2016). LGBT Youth and Family Acceptance. *Pediatr Clin North Am.*, 63(6): 1011–1025.
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