The Decline of Trans and Queer Identity among Young Americans

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Centre for Heterodox Social Science
Report No. 5

Courage
Freedom
Truth

Executive Summary

- After surging in the 2010s and 20s, trans and queer identities are in decline among young Americans
- The transgender share among university students peaked in 2023 and has almost halved since, from nearly 7 percent to under 4 percent
- The share of students identifying as not heterosexual fell by around 10 points in the same period
- The decline in non-heterosexual share is concentrated in the queer or other sexual categories (i.e. pansexual, asexual) and, to a lesser extent, bisexuality
- Today's freshmen are less BTQ+ than seniors, suggesting that decline will continue
- The decline in BTQ+ identification does not appear to be connected to lower social media use, religious revival, a shift to the political right or lower support for woke ideology
- There is evidence that improved mental health has reduced BTQ+ identification

Note on Sources

This study uses data from a number of high-quality youth survey sources that have a time series over a number of years. These include the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) annual campus surveys of undergraduate students – mainly at leading research universities. FIRE surveys sample over 50,000 students per year. I also use the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) freshman survey, which is of similar size though with a more representative focus on all levels of higher education institution. However, it lacks a question on gender identity.

The large-size FIRE and HERI surveys involve only a small share of total students – perhaps 1-10 percent of the target pool, depending on the institution. Thus, in addition, I draw on several institution-level surveys which capture between a quarter and 90 percent of the target pool. These include the Andover Phillips Academy (a private elite prep school) annual student survey, which has 70-90 percent coverage, and the *Brown Daily Herald* spring and fall polls of Brown University students, which reach as much as 50 percent of the target population. Two general population surveys contain relevant information. The Cooperative Election Study (CCES) samples around 60,000 Americans each year, including 2,000 to 4,000 individuals under age 25. The sample is not, however, representative of the US population. The General Social Survey (GSS) is the gold standard US social survey, designed to be representative, but its under-25 sample is usually only in the 100-200 range.
In addition, I include data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s annual Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) survey of US high school students, which reaches a representative sample of approximately 14,000-18,000 grade 9-12 pupils. The CDC's last high school survey was in 2023.

Introduction: Patterns of Gender Identity

The first pattern of note is that the share of young people not identifying as male or female (typically ticking the non-binary or questioning options) has declined substantially since its 2022-23 peak across 3 of 5 data sources. As Figure 1 shows, only in the case of HERI data – which samples a less elite student body – and the CCES, which uses a convenience sample of the population, do we see stability. Here, however, we must note that data is missing for 2025 and the non-binary share has been lower (around 2 percent through 2019-24 for HERI) than in the more elite samples (FIRE, Andover, Brown).

The scale of the decline in the student data is considerable, even accounting for variability in the data. The Andover prep school sample shows a drop from over 9 percent non-binary in 2023 to 3 percent in 2025. In the much larger FIRE sample, the decline during the same period is from 6.8 to 3.6 percent of the total, a near-halving of the non-binary share across a sample of 55,000-69,000 students per annum. The Brown University student survey data, whose 2025 survey captured nearly half the target population, shows a drop from around 5 percent in 2022-23 to 2.6 percent in 2025, also a halving of the non-binary share. In these cases we see a ‘rise and fall’ pattern of numbers returning to pre-surge baselines.

By contrast, the HERI and CCES samples, which are less ‘elite’ in composition, exhibit stability throughout this period, though we lack data for 2025. One possibility could be that the ‘rise and fall’ pattern is more of an elite phenomenon. CDC and GSS data does not have information on gender identity.

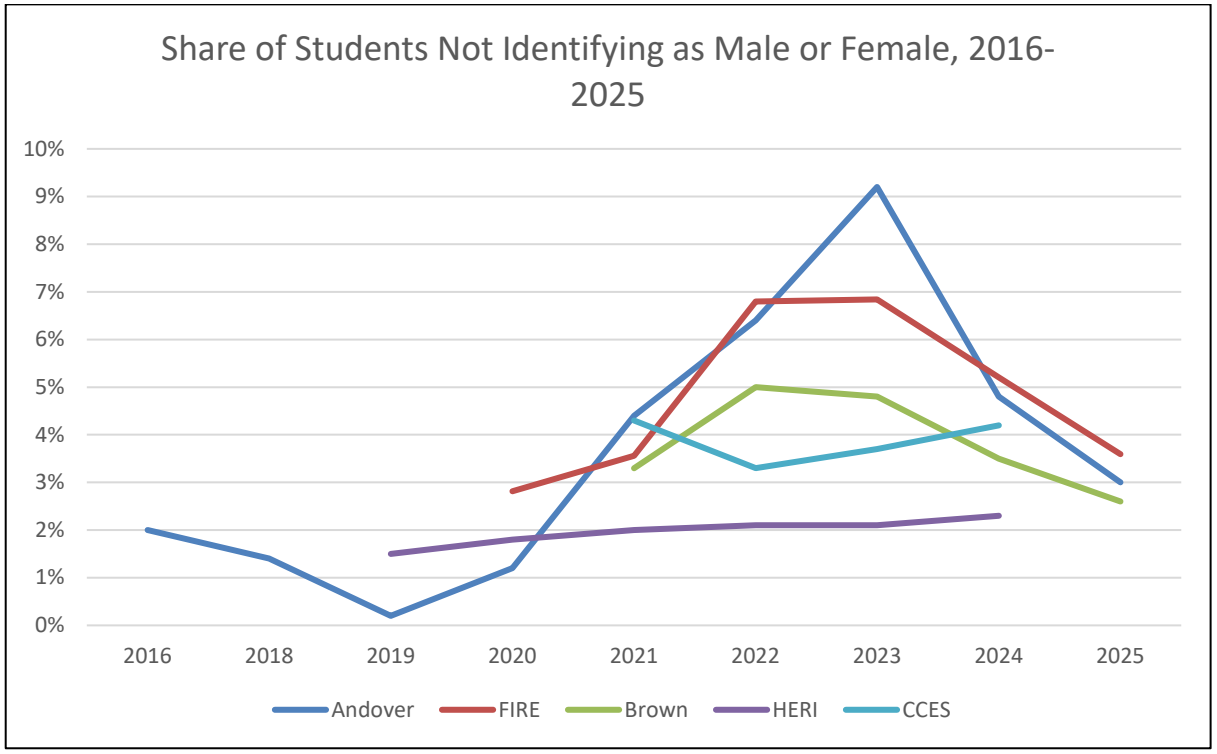

Figure 1

Note: non-binary sample size varies. In larger surveys like FIRE, there are between 563 and 3,641 non-binary students per year.

While many of the universities have remained the same in the FIRE data over time, there is some variation as new institutions are polled and some others dropped. Focusing only on Ivy League schools, however, who have been surveyed consistently over all years, we find a similar pattern. The share identifying as other than male or female in Figure 2 jumps from 3 percent in 2021 to a peak of 7 percent in 2023 before declining to a pre-surge level of 3 percent in 2025.

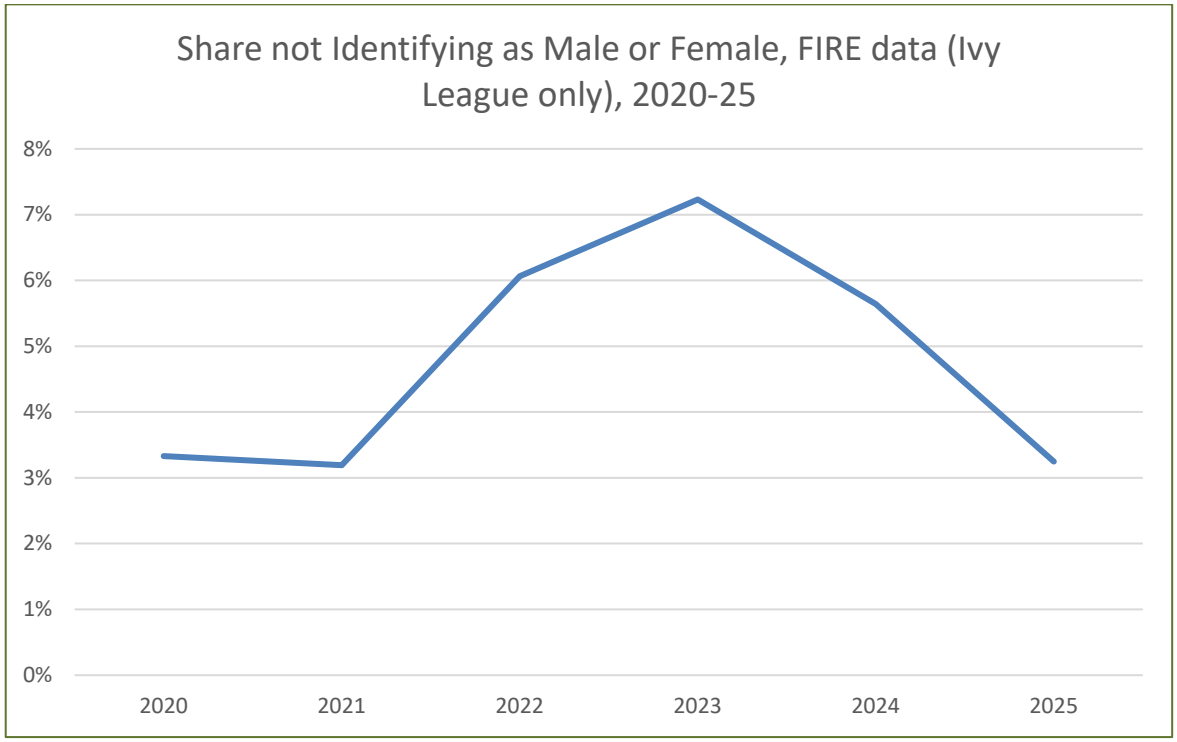

Figure 2

Source: FIRE 2020-2025 surveys, restricted to Ivy League students. N = 1,765 to 2,239, with non-binary at between 64 and 141 per year.

Sexual Orientation

Trends in sexual orientation are more complex, but show a return to heterosexuality even as traditional homosexual categories of gay and lesbian remained stable. Instead, where we see a sharper rise and decline is in the share identifying as bisexual and queer (including questioning, asexual, pansexual and other sexuality). Andover Phillips data in Figure 3 shows that non-heterosexuality peaked during 2022-23 at around a third of the total student body (63.5 percent heterosexual). Heterosexuality rebounded thereafter, though it remains 7 points below its 2020 level. Categories showing the most variation are bisexual, which increased from 10 to 17 percent between 2020 and 2023, then subsided to 12 percent by 2025; as well as queer and other sexual identities. The latter also rose, from 7 percent in 2020 to a peak of 17 percent in 2023 before falling back to 9 percent in 2024 before rebounding slightly to 12 percent in 2025.

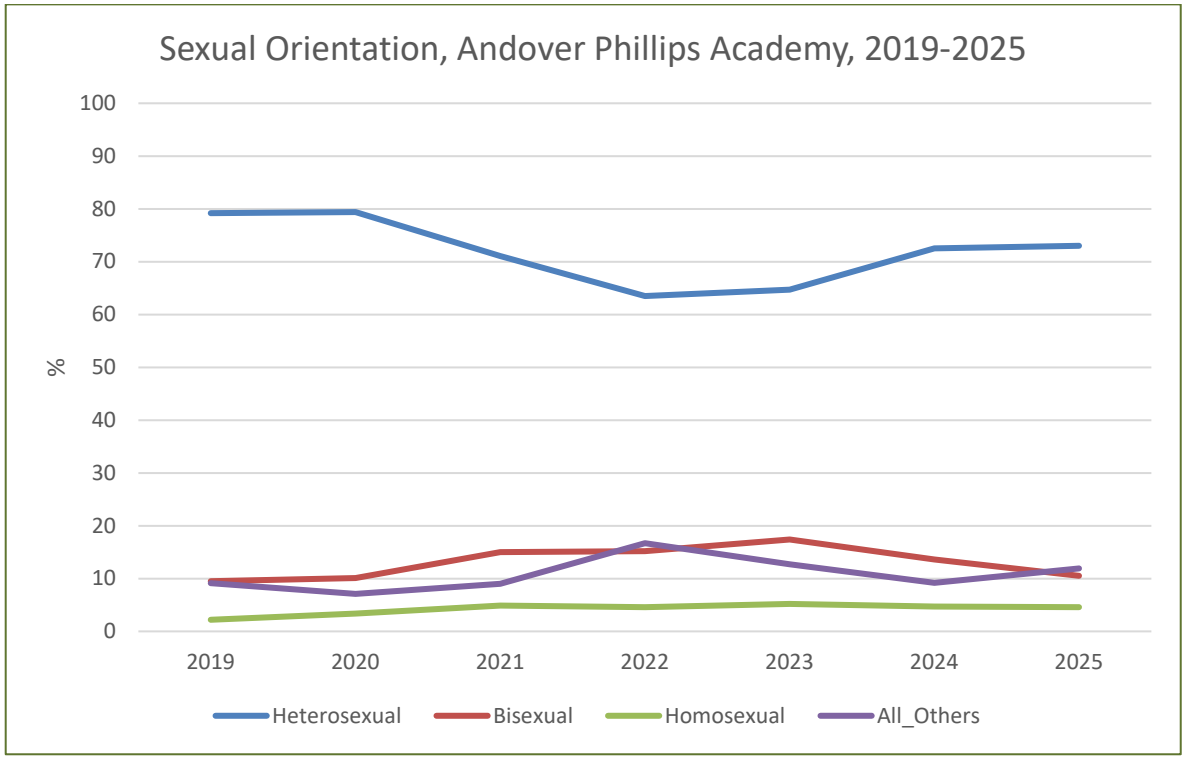

Figure 3

Source: Andover Phillips Academy student surveys, 2019-2025. N is generally in the 700 to 1000 range.

FIRE data in Figure 4 reveals that heterosexuality declined from over 80 percent in 2020 to a trough of 68 percent in 2023 but has rebounded over the past two years to 77 percent, approaching its 2020 baseline level. Bisexuality was largely stable in the FIRE data, neither surging after 2020 nor sliding after 2023 – the rise was from 9 to 12 percent, falling back to just under 11 percent by 2025. Instead, the main shift was in the queer and other sexuality category, which jumped from 7 to 15 percent between 2020 and 2023 before slipping to 8 percent by 2025. Gay/lesbian was largely stable, in the 3-5 percent range, as in the Andover Phillips school data.

Limiting the purview to the eight Ivy League universities in the FIRE data (not shown) reveals a somewhat later peak of non-heterosexuality, in 2024 (37 percent), before declining to 30 percent by 2025. In the Ivy League, bisexuality remained stable, oscillating up and down between 10 and 13 percent throughout the period. Queer and other sexuality shows a pronounced rise and fall pattern, from 7 percent in 2020, up to 16 percent during 2023-24, then down to 9 percent in 2025.

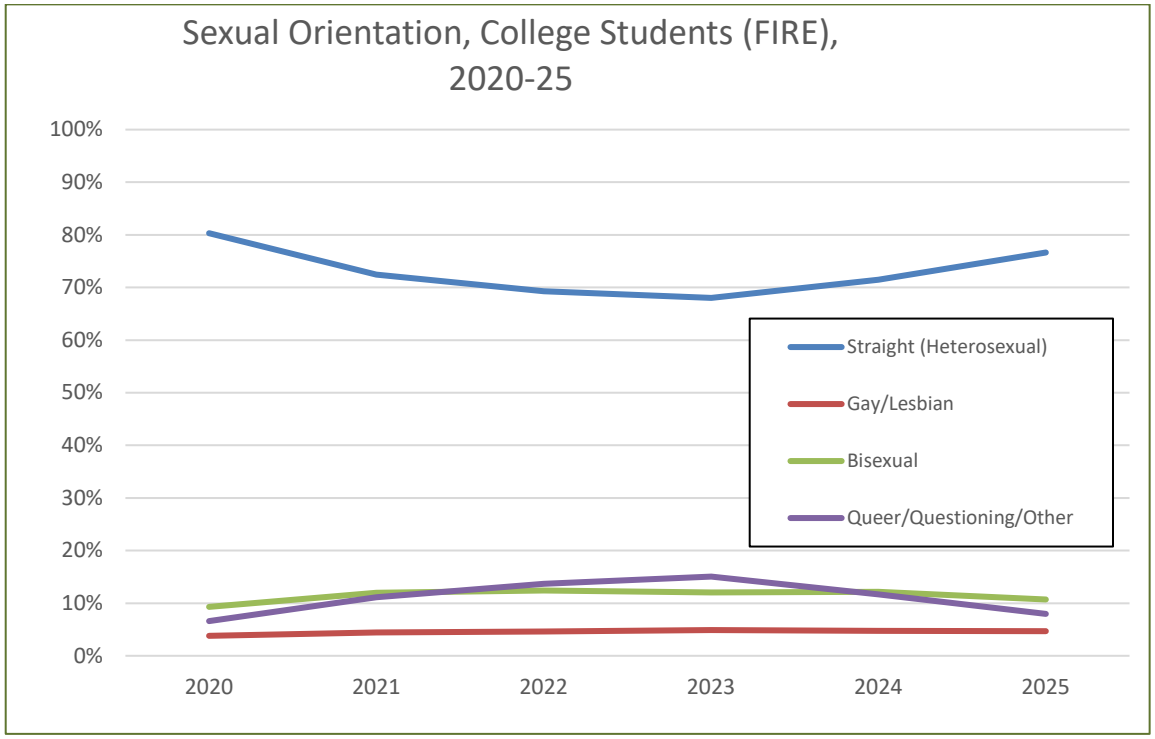

Figure 4

Source: FIRE student surveys, 2020-25. N is 20,002 in 2020, rising to 37,104 in 2021, 44,847 in 2022, 55,102 in 2023, 58,807 in 2024 and 68,510 in 2025.

HERI data in Figure 5, which samples more students from lower-ranked colleges than the FIRE surveys, shows heterosexuality at 87 percent in 2019, falling to a trough of 77 percent in 2023 before recovering to 82 percent in 2024, the most recent year available. Bisexual identity rises from 7 percent in 2019 to 11 percent in 2023, falling to 9 percent in 2024. Queer and other sexuality rises from 3 percent in 2019 to an 8 percent peak in 2023 then back to 6 percent in 2024. Traditional homosexual categories of gay and lesbian oscillate between 2.7 and 3.9 percent albeit with a peak also in 2023.[1]

[1] It is worth noting that the HERI sample has declined from around 200,000 in 2019-20 to 25,500 in 2024 as the number of participating institutions has fallen from 400 to 95 colleges.

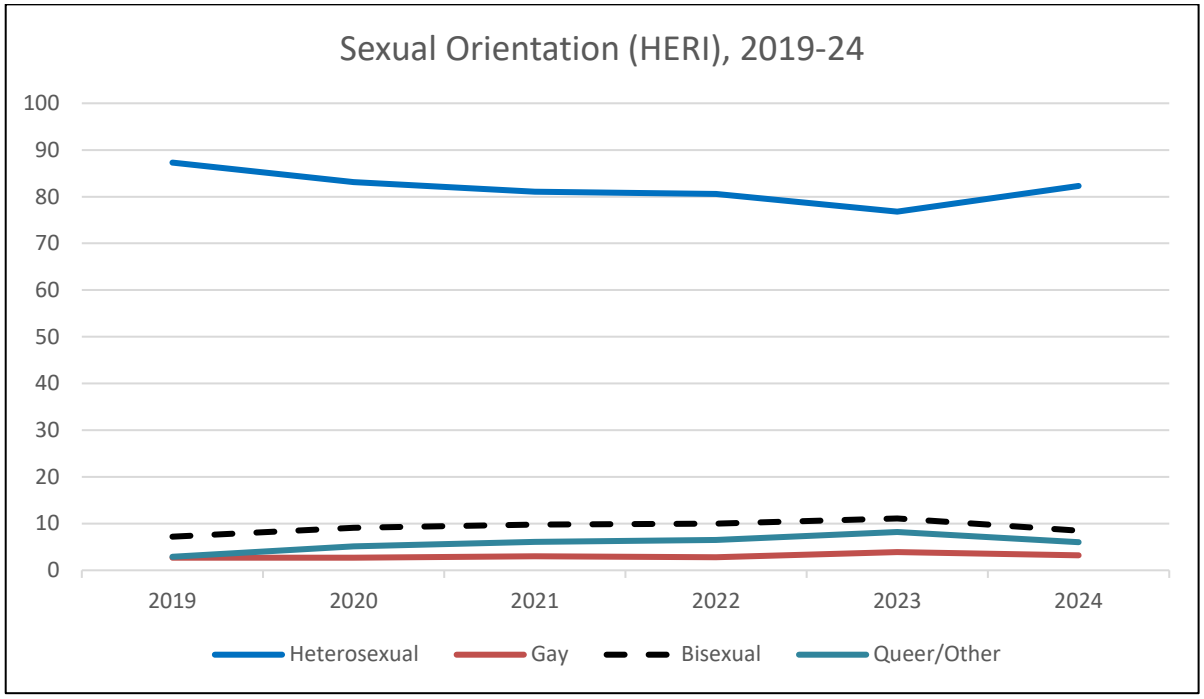

Figure 5

Source: Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) freshman surveys, 2019-2024. N varies from approximately nearly 200,000 per annum in 2019-20 to 25,500 in 2024.

Brown University's student newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, has asked about sexual orientation on its undergraduate student surveys since 2010. Figure 6 shows that the non-heterosexual share declined gradually, from 87 percent in 2010 to just under 80 percent in 2019 before dropping rapidly to below 60 percent in 2022-23. Since then, the heterosexual share has risen, reaching 68 percent in the most recent survey in the fall of 2025. While all sexual categories follow a rise and fall trajectory, the bisexual category increased most, from 6 percent in 2010 to 18-19 percent during 2022-23 before falling back to 13 percent in 2025. The queer and other category rose from 4 percent in 2010 to a peak of 16-17 percent in 2022-23, falling to the 9-13 percent range in 2024-25. While Brown's pattern resembles those found in other data, it is noteworthy that its gay and lesbian share varied more than other survey sources examined here, from 3-5 percent between 2010 and 2019, into the 7-10 percent range during 2020-24, then down to 6 percent in 2025.

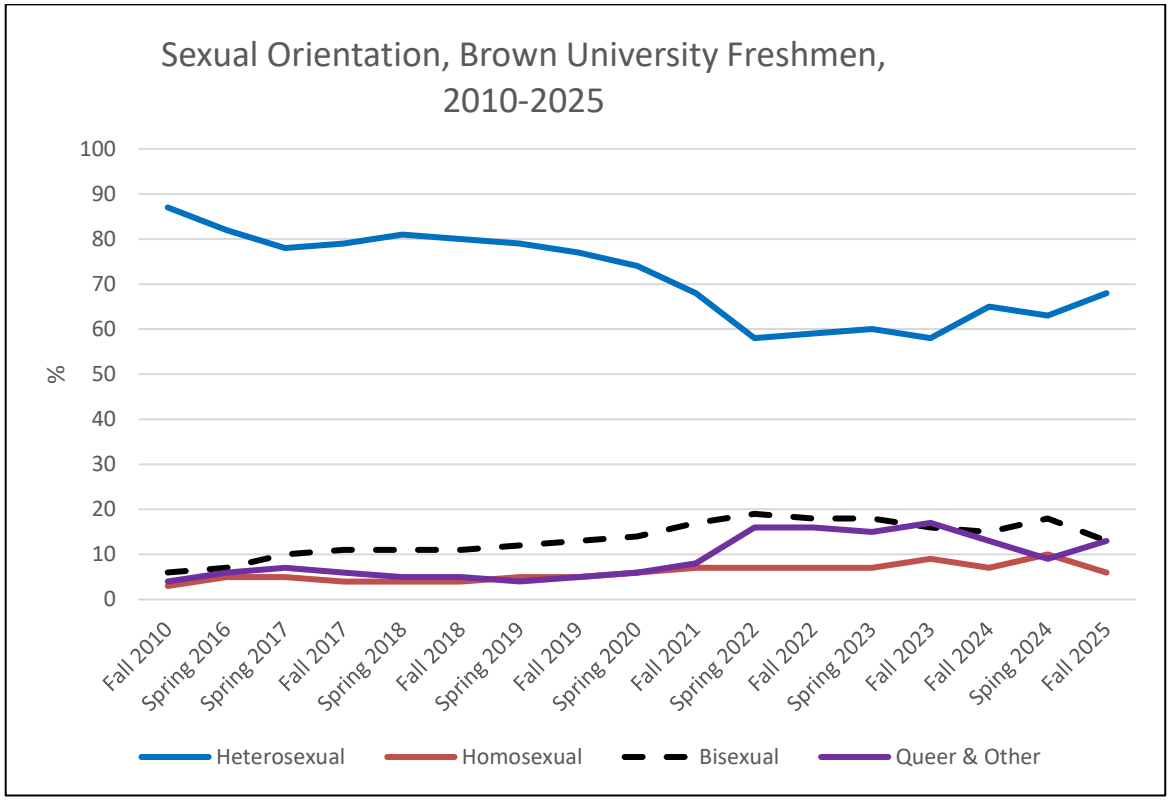

Figure 6

Source: *Brown Daily Herald* student surveys. N ranges from 700 to 1100 per year.

Surveys of the wider youth population show a less definitive picture. The Cooperative Election Study (CCES) is a 60,000 person sample which captures as many as 4,000 young adults under age 25 in recent waves. CCES data is not limited to those with university education, but, on the other hand, is not a representative sample of the population. CCES data in Figure 7 shows a continued rise of non-heterosexuality through to 2024 with the largest rise being in the bisexual category. No data is available for 2025.

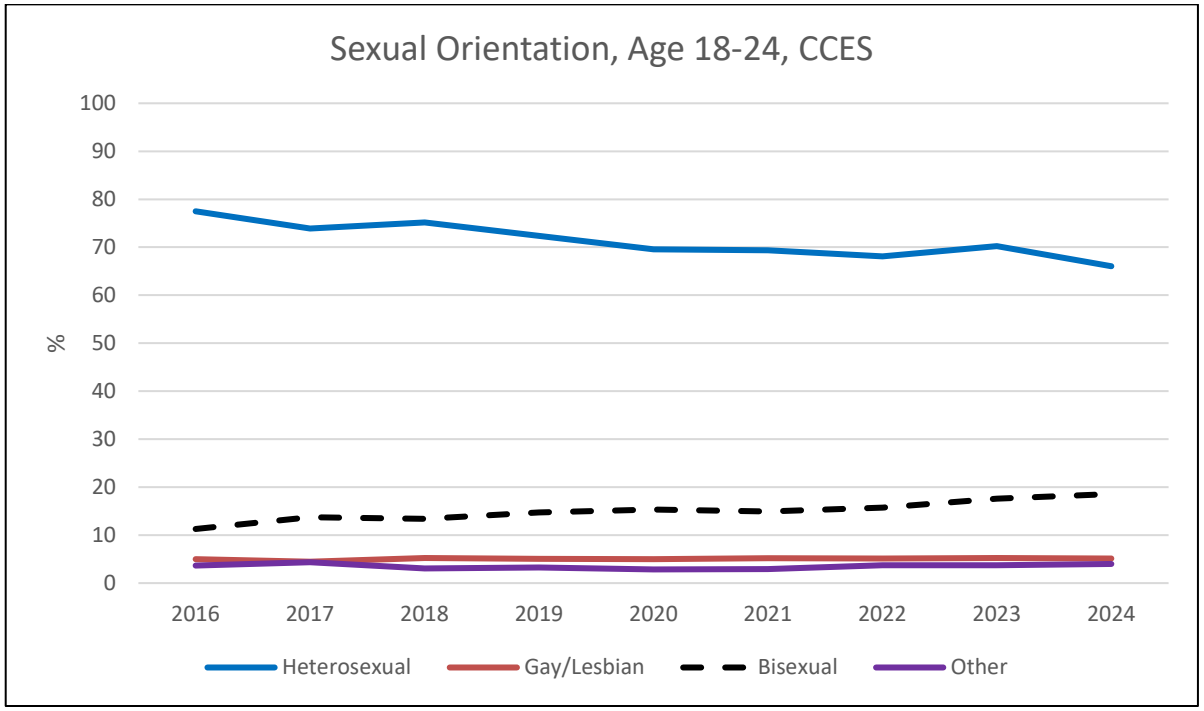

Figure 7

Source: *Cooperative Election Study*, 2016-2024. N ranges from 1,921 to 4,763 per year.

The General Social Survey (GSS) is the gold standard US social survey. As compared to CCES, it has the benefit of collecting a representative sample using rigorous sampling methods, but the size of its youth sample is generally only between 100 and 200 per year. GSS data on those 18 to 24 in Figure 8 shows a drop in heterosexual share from 95 percent in 2010 to 71 percent in 2022, rising back to 81 percent in 2024. Most of the rebound is accounted for by a decline in the share ticking the 'bisexual' box, which fell from 22 percent in 2022 to 14 percent in 2024. There is no option for queer or other, so one must assume that such individuals selected the homosexual or bisexual options.

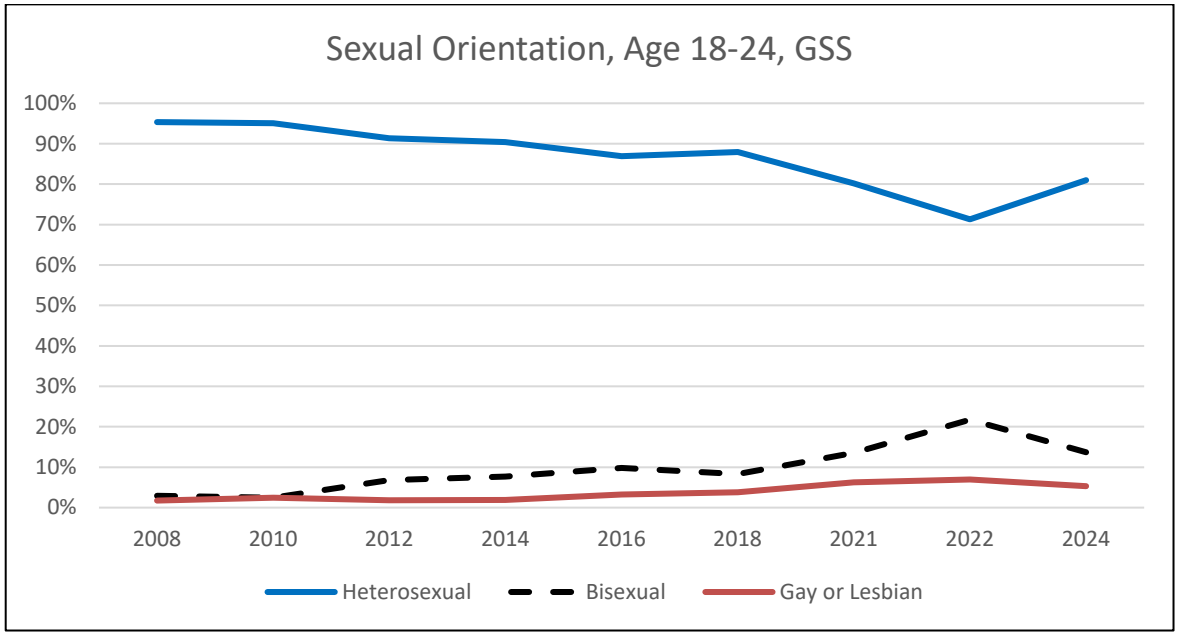

Figure 8

Source: *General Social Survey*, 2016-2024. N ranges from 96 to 226 per year.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Figure 9 tells a similar story for its representative grade 9-12 high school sample of around 15,000, but with a slightly different inflection point. The data lacks detail on sexuality subcategories such as bisexual and queer. Even so, the macro non-heterosexuality trend is familiar: it shows a rise from 11 percent non-heterosexual in 2015 to 26-27 percent between 2021 and 2023. Subsequent data is not available.

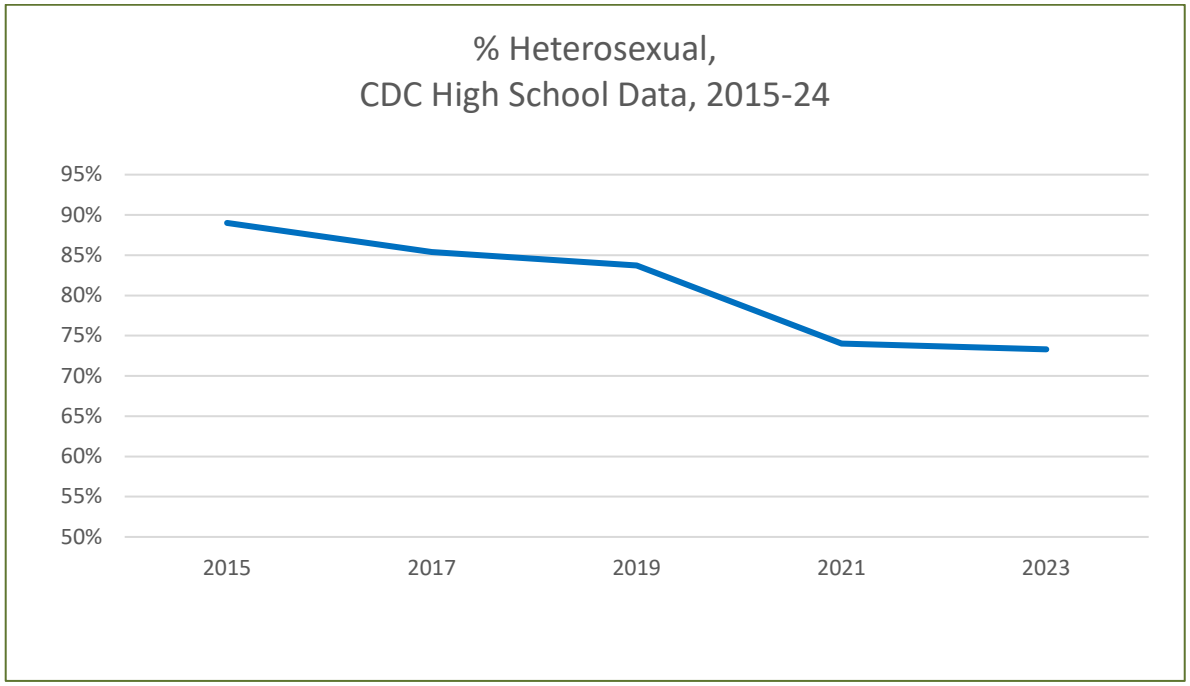

Figure 9

Source: CDC YRBSS surveys, 2015-23. N ranges from 13,700 to 17,700 per year.

Examining all data sources on the macro heterosexuality trend among young Americans in Figure 10 illustrates a common pattern, albeit with some variability. The average peak of non-heterosexuality, in 2023, matches the peak in non-binary gender identity in many of the surveys we have available (apart from HERI and CCES). This suggests a common dynamic behind both patterns. This is not entirely surprising as most non-binary individuals identify as non-heterosexual, and mainly outside the lesbian/gay category.

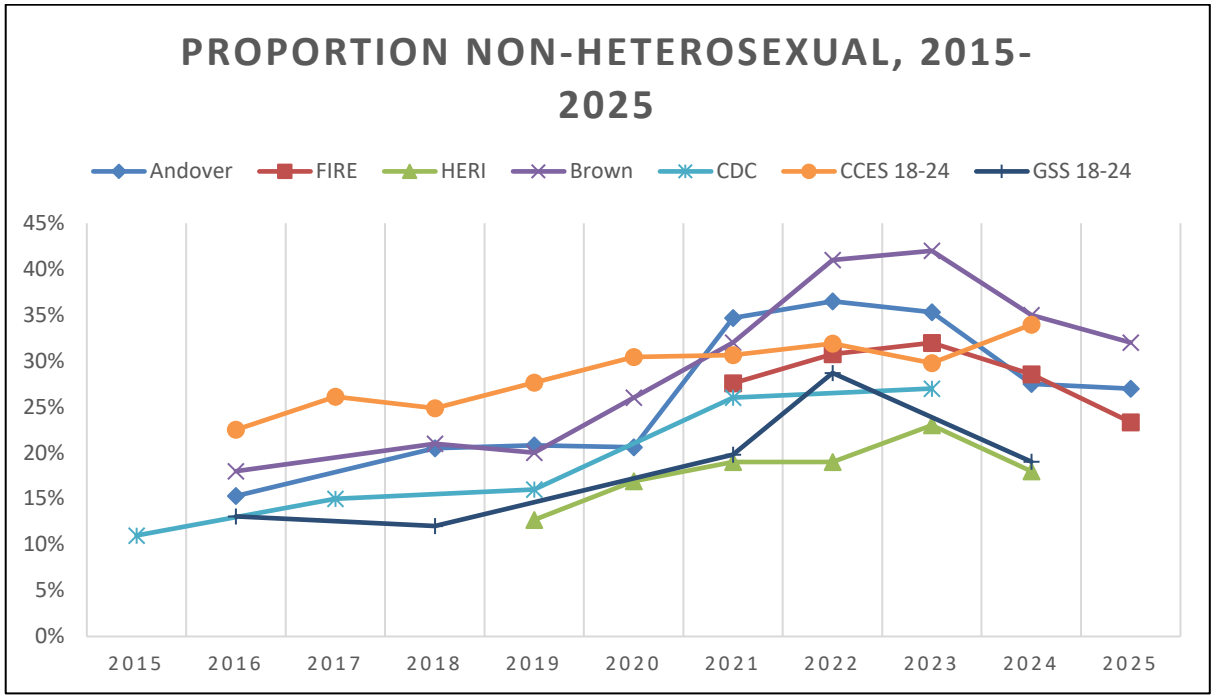

Figure 10

It appears that trans and queer are going out of fashion among young people, especially in elite settings. Figures 11 and 12 show the trend by year of survey and graduating class (later graduation years represent younger students). When trans, bisexual and queer were at their peak, they were more popular in later graduating classes (i.e. the 2025 cohort in 2022 or 2026 cohort in 2023). But by 2025, the freshman 2028 cohort was less likely than older students in 2025 to identify as BTQ+. The fastest declines in BTQ+ identity over 2022-25 took place within the 2025 and 2026 graduating classes with 2027 and 2028 cohorts starting college life at lower BTQ+ levels. To the extent that the youngest represent the leading edge of new trends, this suggests that trans, bisexual and queer identities are declining in popularity with each new cohort.

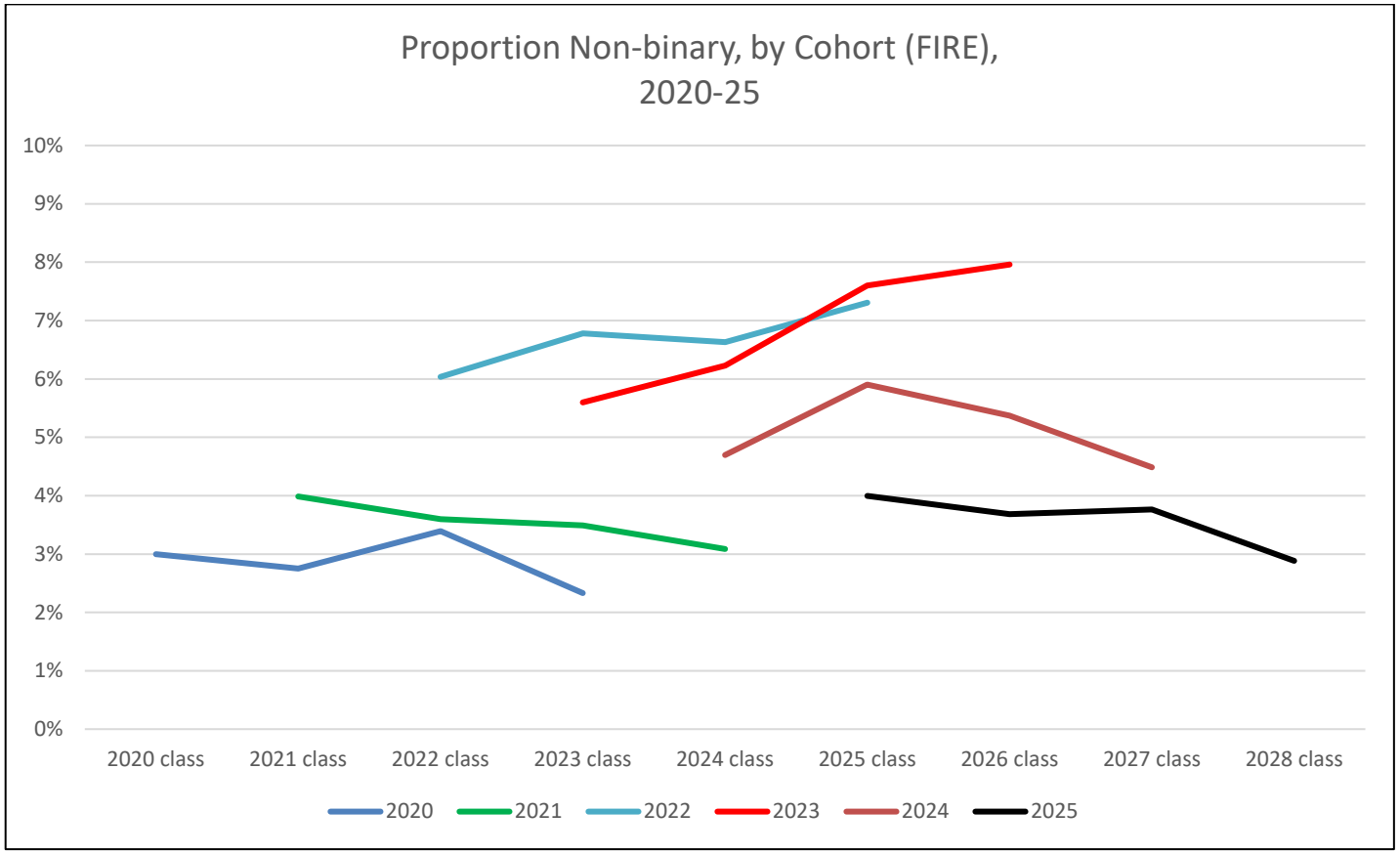

Figure 11

Source: FIRE 2020-25 surveys.

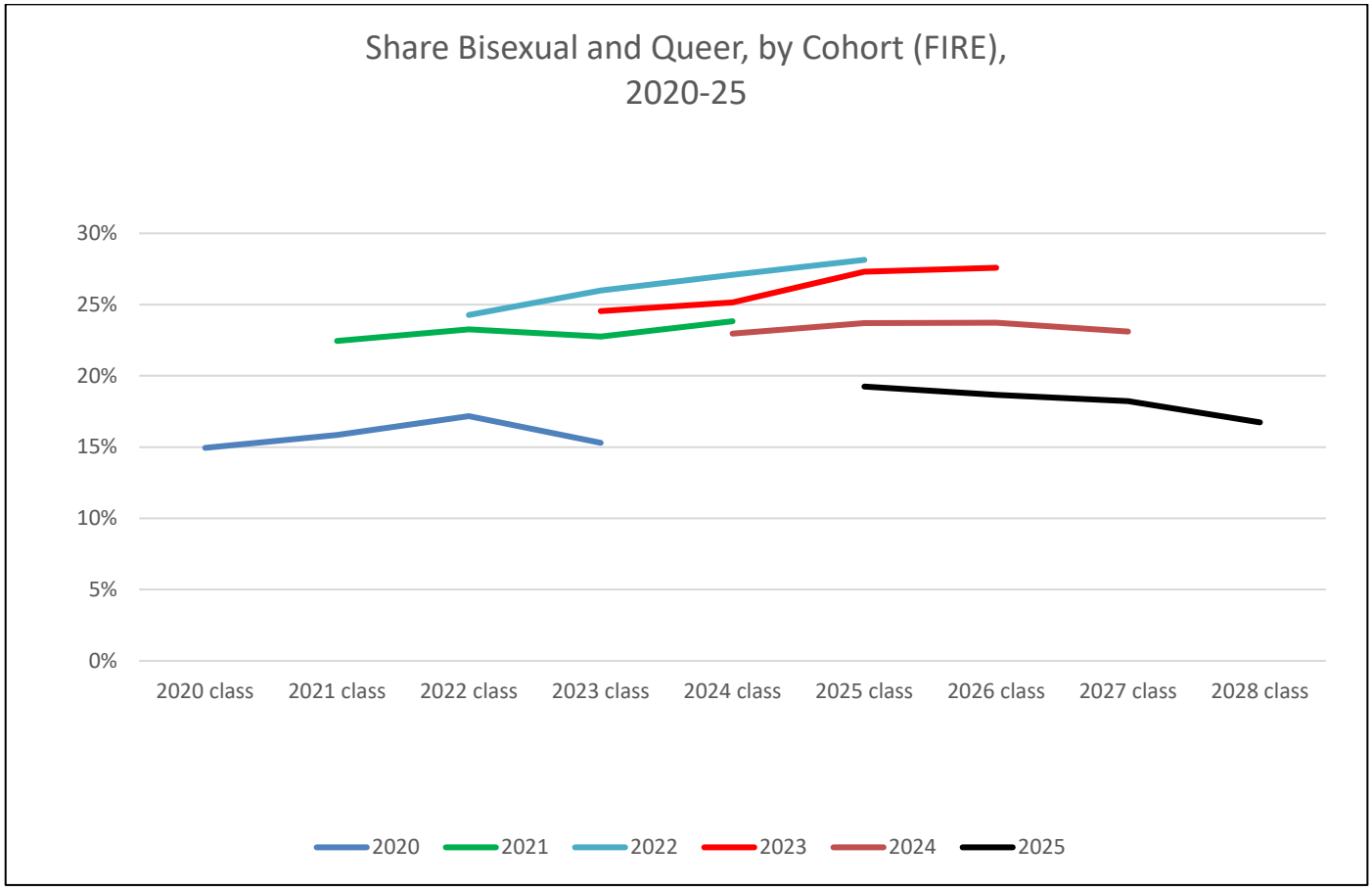

Figure 12

Source: FIRE 2020-25 surveys.

Explaining the Rise and Fall Pattern in Sexual and Gender Identity

We have seen that a range of data on high school students and undergraduates report a common pattern in which the share of non-binary, bisexual and queer young people rose after 2010 and fell after 2023. What might the cause of this pattern be? In what follows, I explore a number of potential hypotheses.

Mental Health

In survey data, LGBT young people report consistently worse mental health than heterosexual young people. Whether this is because LGBT causes mental illness (i.e. the minority stress or anomie hypotheses), or because mental illness causes individuals to be LGBT is beyond the scope of this work.[2]

[2] Meyer, I. H. (1995). "Minority stress and mental health in gay men." Journal of health and social behavior: 38-56; Michael Bailey, J. (2020). "The Minority Stress Model Deserves Reconsideration, Not Just Extension." Archives of Sexual Behavior **49**(7): 2265-2268.

Recent data from the US shows that the persistent rise in youth mental illness in the 2010s peaked after the pandemic in 2021, and improved by 2023. Some of the seven data sources considered by the *Economist* showed a peak in 2021 and some in 2022, but all had declined by 2023.[3] The pandemic provided a natural experiment: if mental illness causes changes in sexual and gender identity, we should have expected a peak of both in 2021-22. In fact the pandemic and its passing caused youth mental illness to spike in 2021-22 and drop thereafter but the LGBT spike took place a year later, in 2022-23. While a one-year lag between mental health improvements and LGBT reduction is possible, we must explain why there was a delayed pandemic effect for sexual orientation and gender identity but not for mental health.

Improved youth mental health cannot adequately explain declining trans, queer and bisexual share. Figure 13 summarizes CDC data on grade 9-12 teens by demographic, showing that improvements in mental health occurred within virtually all groups. Of particular note is that the share of LGBT high school students reporting being sad or hopeless most of the time declined from 76 to 65 percent between 2021 and 2023. The post-pandemic era of improving mental health appears to encompass alternative sexual orientation and gender suggesting the two trends are substantially independent over time.

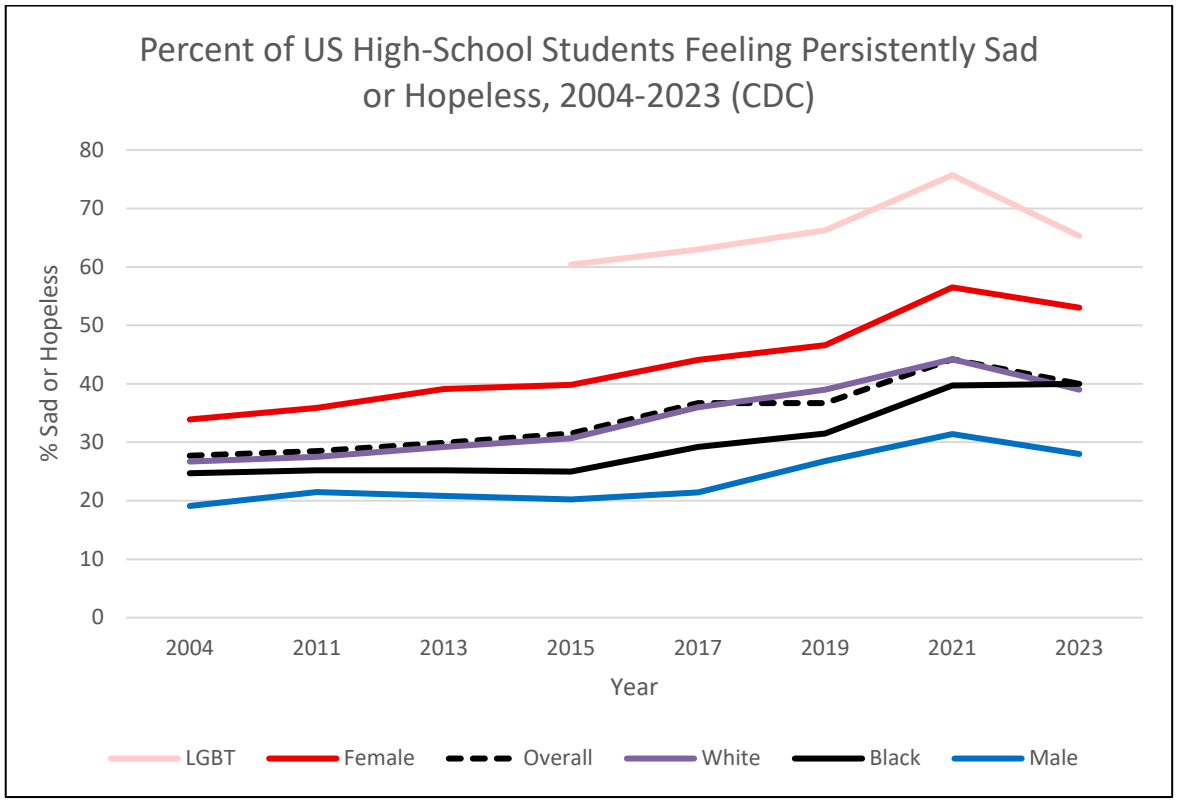

Figure 13

[3] 'Glow Up', *Economist*, March 2015 edition

Source: CDC YRBSS surveys, with N generally in the 14,000 to 18,000 range.

FIRE has asked about anxiety and depression for the past three survey waves, from 2023 to 2025. This question, graphed in Figure 14, shows a pattern of declining anxiety and depression (i.e. improving mental health) among students, reflecting the results reported by the CDC and *Economist*.

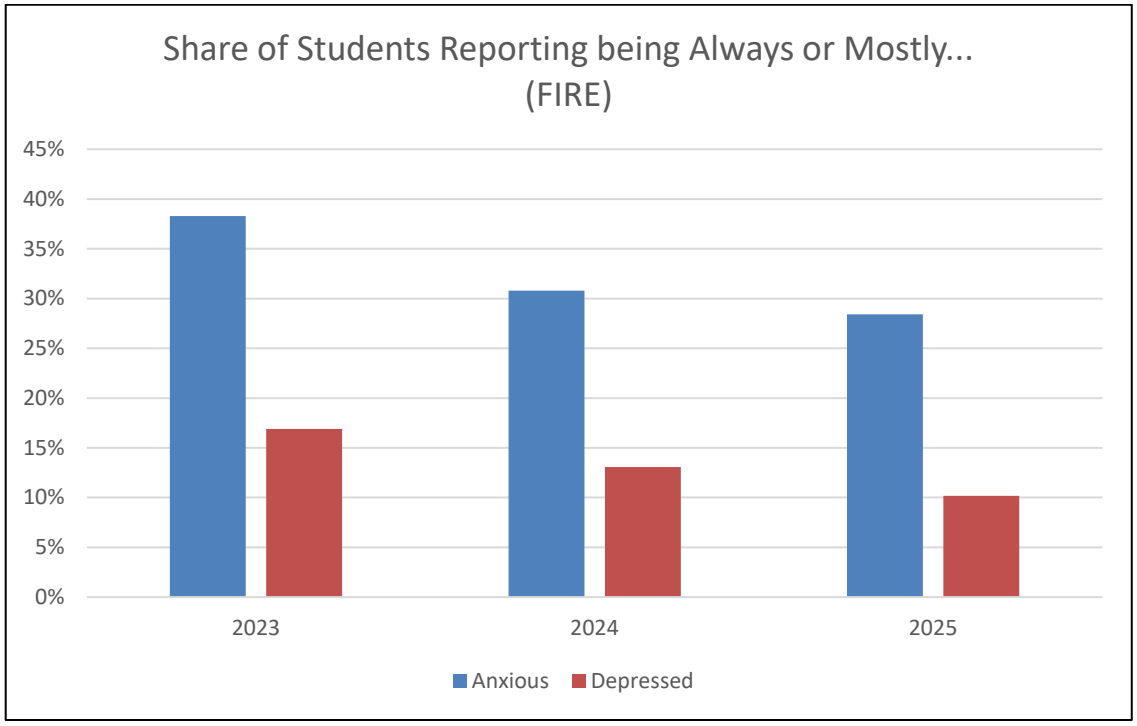

Figure 14

Source: FIRE student surveys, 2023-2025 only. N ranges from 55,102 to 68,510.

As in the CDC data in Figure 13, FIRE data in Figure 15 demonstrates that improvements in mental health have taken place among all socio-demographic categories, even as LGBT and very liberal students report consistently worse mental health than conservative and heterosexual students. This suggests that mental health dynamics are substantially independent of ideology and sexual orientation, at least over time.

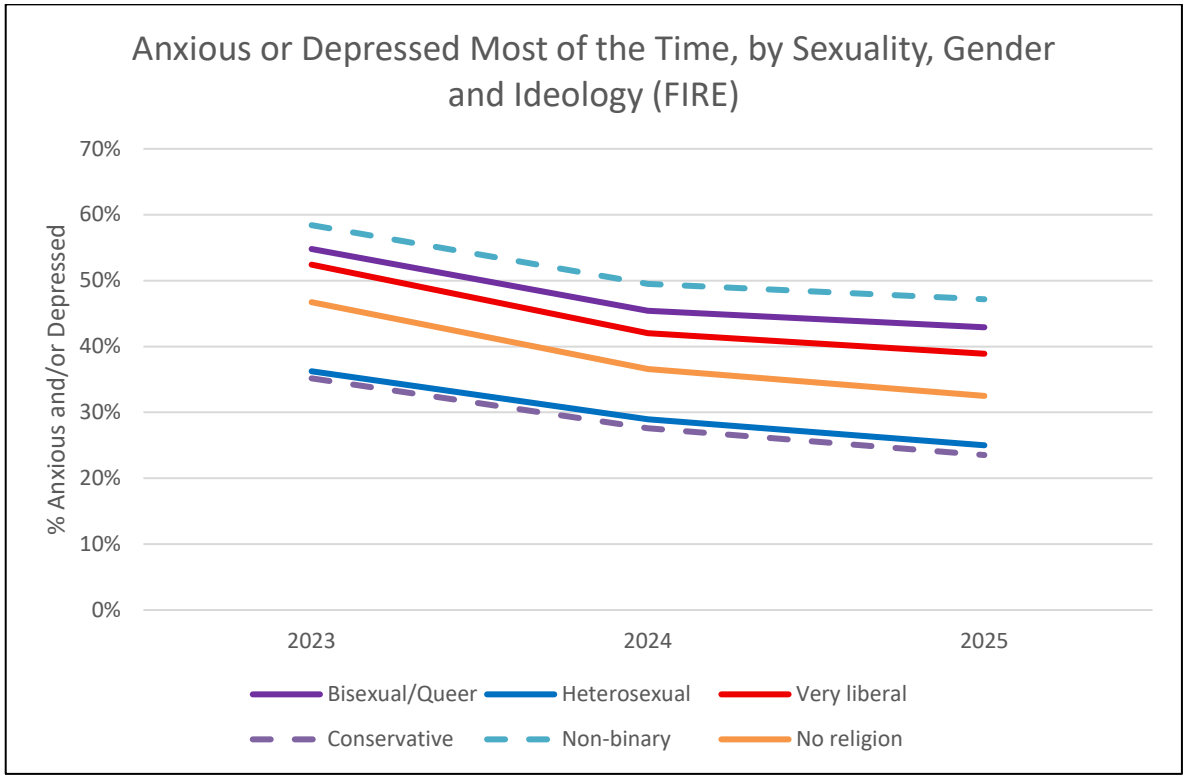

Figure 15

Source: FIRE student surveys, 2023-2025 only. N ranges from 55,102 to 68,510.

But while improved mental health does not adequately account for the decline in BTQ+ identification, it does appear to account for a portion of the change. How so? Figure 16 inverts data from the previous chart to look at the non-binary share by mental health category. While the trans share falls across all mental health categories, it declines less among those who are depressed. In fact the non-binary share of depressed students actually *rose* between 2024 and 2025, from 10.8 to 11.6 percent. Among those who are anxious it falls 3 points and among the mentally healthy, the decline in trans identification is 2 points. The decline in trans identification across all students was 3.2 points (6.8 percent to 3.2 percent) in these years, a larger drop than among all mentally healthy or ill categories in Figure 16. This means that part of the decline in trans identification was compositional, arising because there were fewer students with anxiety and depression in 2025 than in 2023.

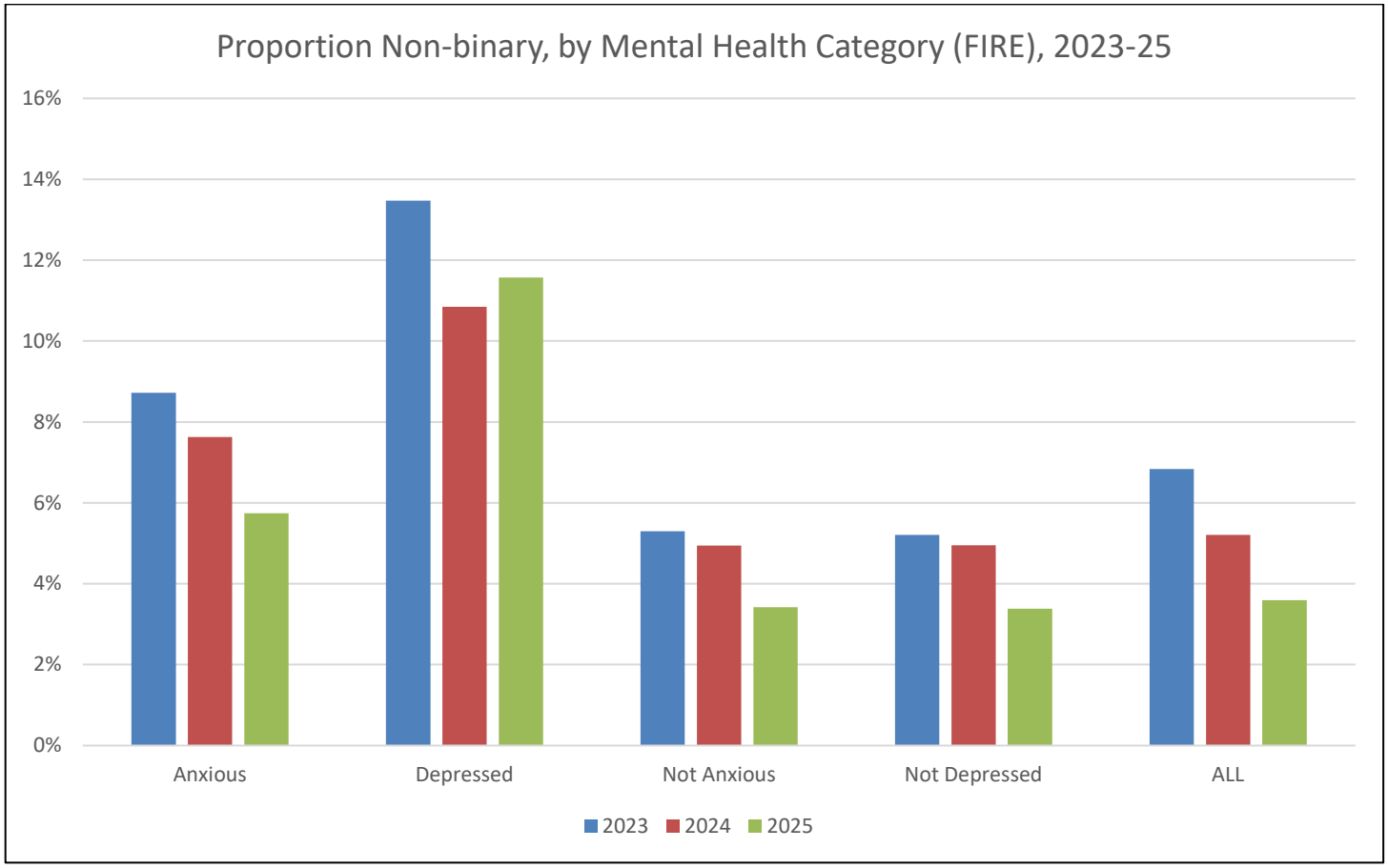

Figure 16

Source: FIRE surveys, 2023-25.

Figure 17 shows the same result for queer/bisexual identification, even more so. The largest decline in BQ+ identification in any one mental health category is 6 points, whereas the overall decline across students is 10 points. The rising mentally healthy share accounts for an important part of the story of declining BQ+ identification, as with declining trans identity in Figure 15. To test this statistically, I added mental health variables to a model predicting trans and BQ+ identification for the years 2023 to 2025. In both models, adding mental health variables strongly reduced the effect size of year, indicating that the 'rise and fall' pattern in BTQ+ identification is partly an artefact of rising and falling mental health problems.[4]

[4] Year x mental health interactions were also significant in some cases, suggesting that year effects made less of an impact on those with mental health problems than those without.

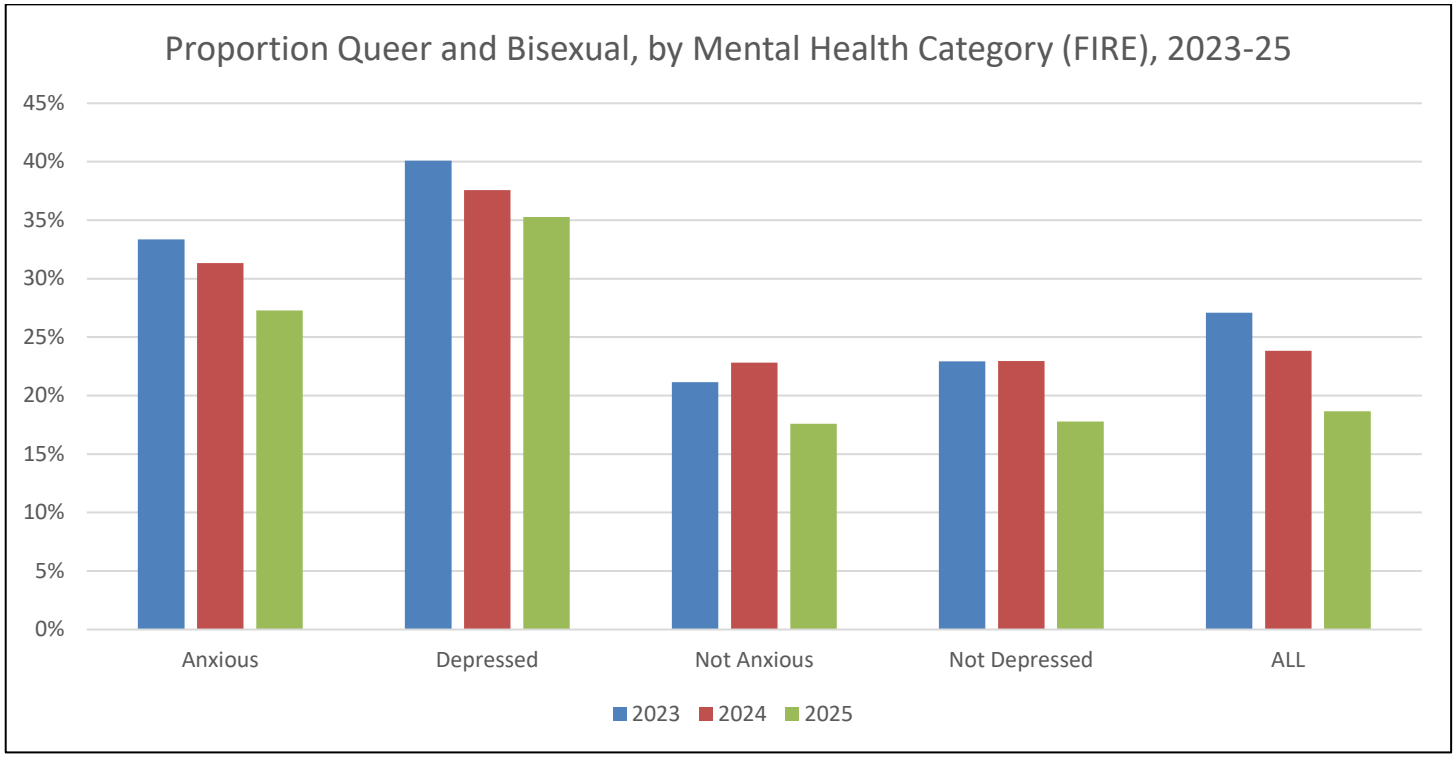

Figure 17

Source: FIRE surveys, 2023-25.

Political Beliefs and Religiosity

Might changing political or cultural attitudes be behind the decline in BTQ+ identification? The FIRE data in Figure 18 clearly shows that political ideology, culture war attitudes and levels of religious identification remained stable throughout the 2020-25 period. This contrasts with the pronounced 'rise and fall' pattern noted for sexual and gender identity. Trump, Biden and the 'vibe shift' away from woke in the elite culture appear to have had little effect on the gender and sexual identities of students.[5] It is worth adding that social media use among American young people rose in the 2010s to a peak in the early 2020s, with nearly half online 'almost constantly', and had not declined as of 2024.[6]

[5] See, for instance, Yglesias, M., 'The Vibes they are A-Shiftin',' *Slow Boring* substack, January 23, 2025.
[6] Burn-Murdoch, J. 2025. 'Have we passed peak social media? ,' *Financial Times*, October 3; 'Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024,' *Pew*, December 12

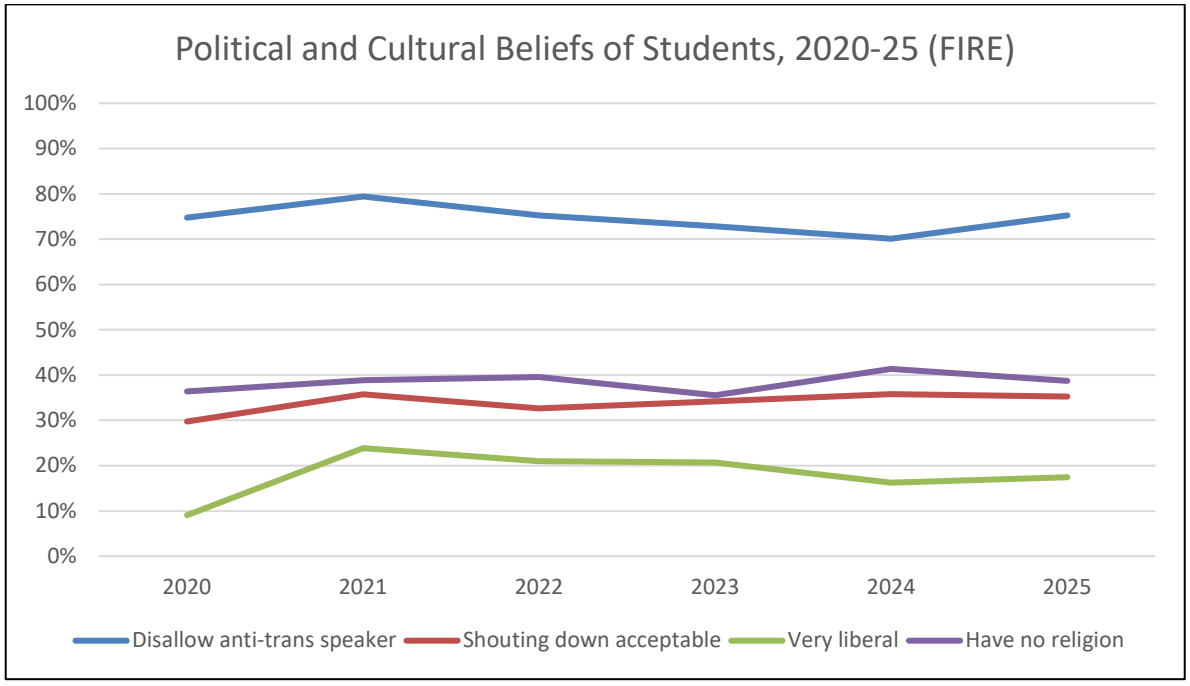

Figure 18

Source: FIRE student surveys, 2020-25. N ranges from 20,000 to 68,000 per year.

Even as there appears to be little connection between mental illness, sexual and gender identity, and political beliefs over time, this does not mean there is no correlation between these forces within individuals. One latent factor explains nearly half the variation in sexual orientation, political beliefs and mental health in the FIRE student data, and this relationship did not change between 2023 and 2025. As Figure 19 shows, there are significant correlations between gender, sexuality, political beliefs and mental health. In particular, trans or non-binary individuals, as well as very liberal students, are much more likely than others to be non-heterosexual. Very liberal, trans and non-heterosexual students are also more likely than other students to be anxious and depressed, as we saw in Figures 13 and 15.

The correspondence is similar to the relationship between social media and mental health. There is evidence that social media use is correlated with poor mental health among young people at any one point in time even as the over-time trends since the pandemic do not show social media use declining as youth mental health has improved.[7] In statistics, it is well-known that trends over time may behave differently from those at one point in time. Just as richer US states may vote Democratic even as rich individuals vote Republican, more BTQ+ time points may exhibit no change in woke attitudes compared to less BTQ+ time points even as BTQ+ individuals

[7] Haidt, J. (2024). The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness, Random House.

are more woke than heterosexual individuals.[8] Effects over time often respond to faster-moving forces such as fads and trends while those at one point in time may reflect slower-moving, deeply-rooted conditioning factors such as parental upbringing or genetics.

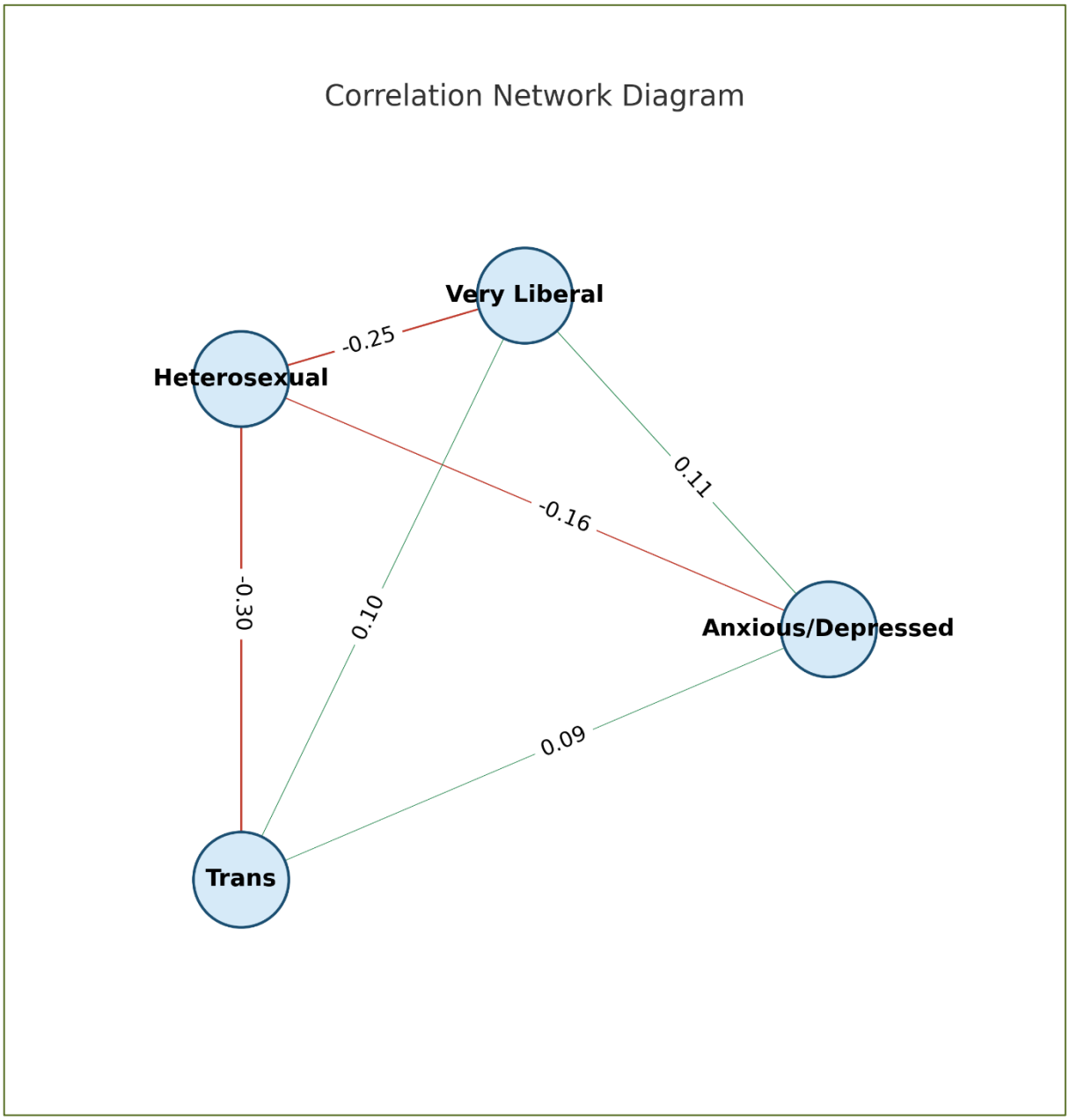

Figure 19

Source: FIRE student surveys 2023-25.

Note: red signifies an inverse correlation between variables in the FIRE individual-level data, green a positive correlation.

One way of screening out the deep-rooted correlations between sexuality/gender, politics and mental health

[8] Known as the 'ecological fallacy in time-series cross-national analysis.' See Preston, S. H. (1975). "The changing relation between mortality and level of economic development." Population studies **29**(2): 231-248.

within individuals and the faster shifts in social pressure and taste that operate over time is to conduct a statistical analysis to control for politics, religion and mental illness. If shifts in these factors are what is affecting BTQ+ identity over time, then we should see the effect of year lose statistical significance. However, statistical analysis with FIRE data shows that year of survey predicts a rise or fall in BTQ+ identity even after controlling for other important factors. Figure 20 illustrates this for both trans and bisexual/queer identification, which rises and falls over the 2020-25 period even when controlling for religion, political ideology, anxiety/depression and social class background – though these are all strongly statistically significant.

The peak year for both trends, with controls, is 2022. Notice that this differs from the 2023 peak in the raw data trend on BTQ+ identity in Figures 1 and 10. When mental health is removed from the model, year effects become more significant and the peak reverts to 2023, showing that improving mental health is part of the reason for the rise and fall pattern in BTQ+ identification over time. Having said this, even with mental health controlled in the model, year effects remain significant, showing that improving mental health is only part of the story behind the decline of BTQ identification in these years.

Figure 20

Source: FIRE data. Trans model: Pseudo-R^2 of .034, with years 2022 and 2023 significant in comparison to 2020; BQ+ model: Pseudo-R^2 of .090, with years 2021, 2022 and 2025 (negatively) significant compared to 2020. N=226,117.

Conclusion

Trans, queer and bisexual identities are in rapid decline among young educated Americans.

This does not appear to be the result of a shift to the right, the return of religion or a rejection of woke culture war attitudes. Despite high correlations between sexual/gender identity and political attitudes within individuals, the over-time trend in gender and sexuality seems relatively independent of political, cultural and religious beliefs. Improving mental health, however, appears to be part of the explanation for the decline of BTQ+ identification.

One possibility is that woke beliefs played a role in the emergence of BTQ+ identity and mental illness identification in the 2010s, but that these have since become substantially uncoupled, obeying their own distinct rhythms. Further work is needed to test this hypothesis.

Only time will tell if the substantial decline of BTQ+ identification will continue among young Americans. If so, this represents a momentous and unanticipated post-progressive cultural shift in American society which is distinctly out of phase with the expectations of cultural left observers in educational institutions and legacy media outlets.[9]

[9] Kaufmann, E. (2025). "The post-progressive condition: Meta-critical theory and the rebalancing of knowledge." Theory and Society **54**(1): 139-159.

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