



Reading Minds, Finding Community:

Theory of Mind and Queer Peer Networks in Adolescence

Christopher Osterhaus¹ & Salvatore Ioverno²

¹University of Vechta (Germany); ²Università Roma Tre (Italy)

Introduction

Social Cognition and Friendships

- Theory of Mind (ToM) helps children and adolescents navigate social worlds, supporting friendship, popularity, and lower loneliness (Koerber & Osterhaus, 2020; Osterhaus et al., 2025)
- For sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth, queer peer networks are especially meaningful because they provide affirmation, belonging, and protection from minority stress (e.g., Russell & Fish, 2016)
- Our previous work further shows that ToM is related to coming-out milestones among SGM adolescents, suggesting that mentalizing may also help youth manage identity disclosure and other socially complex aspects of development (Osterhaus & Ioverno, 2025)
- Yet little is known about whether social-cognitive skills are linked to the
- composition of SGM adolescents' peer networks

Research question

- Do adolescents with stronger ToM report having queer friends?

Methods

Sample: $N = 148$ SGM adolescents from Germany ($n = 137$ assigned female at birth)

Sexual orientation: lesbian/gay 18.9%, bisexual 23.0%, queer 17.6%, unsure 13.5%, asexual 7.4%, pansexual 16.9%, other 2.7%.

Measures

- ToM: Eyes Test (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001)
- Reported number of queer friends



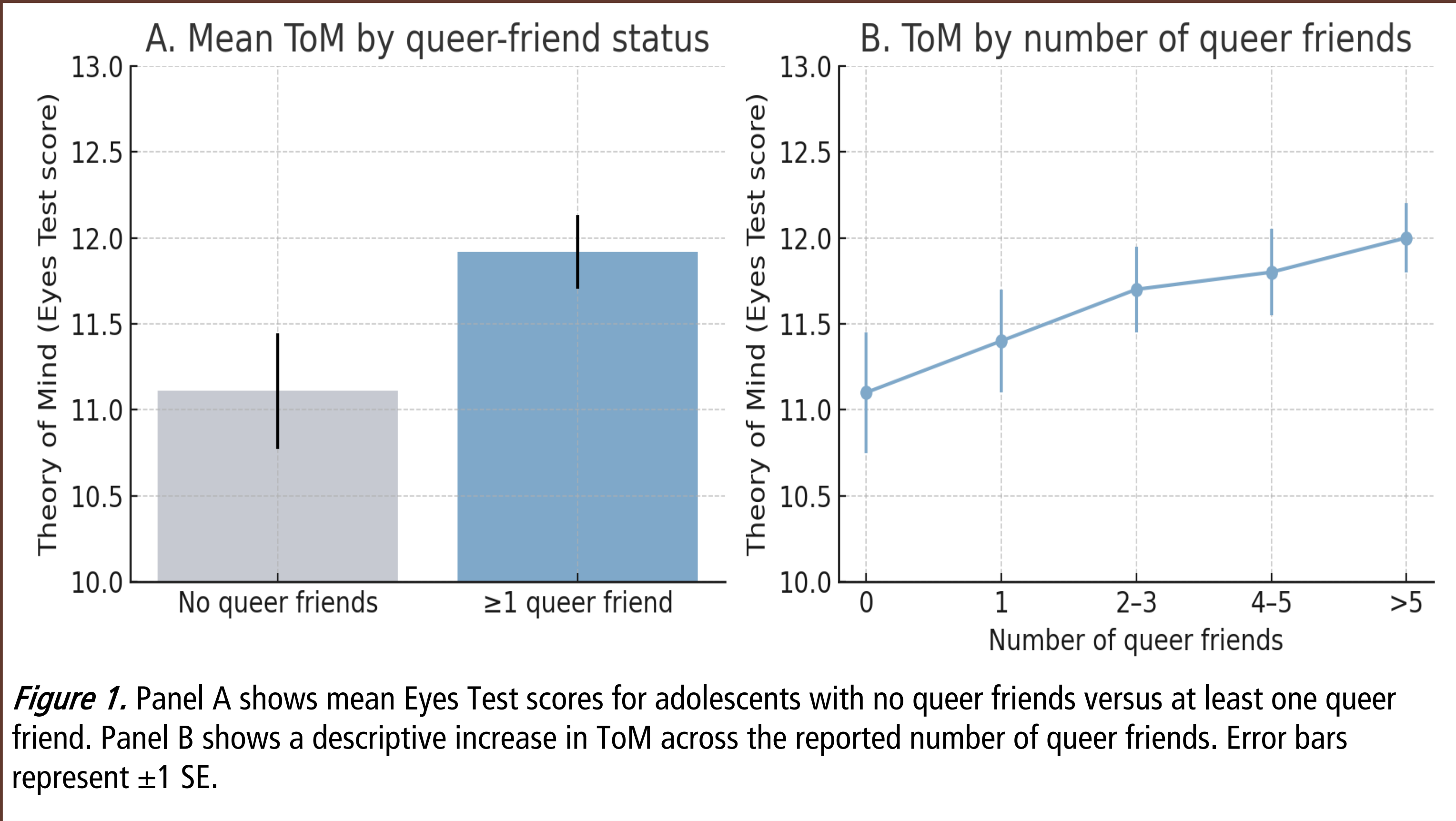
Analysis

- independent-samples t test (none vs. ≥ 1 queer friend)
- descriptive distribution of queer-friend categories
- correlations with identity well-being indicators

Results

Main findings

- 31.8% reported no queer friends; 68.2% reported at least one queer friend.
- Adolescents with ≥ 1 queer friend scored higher on the Eyes Test ($M = 11.92$, $SD = 2.09$, $n = 95$) than those with no queer friends ($M = 11.11$, $SD = 2.44$, $n = 53$).
- This difference was statistically significant, $t(146) = -2.11$, $p = .037$, 95% CI $[-1.56, -0.05]$, Cohen's $d = 0.38$.
- Descriptively, ToM scores increased across categories of queer-friend number (0, 1, 2–3, 4–5, >5).



Related well-being findings from the same German SGM sample (Osterhaus & Ioverno, 2025)

- Higher ToM was associated with earlier first coming out ($r = -.208$, $p < .05$) and a shorter concealment duration ($r = -.238$, $p < .05$).
- Higher ToM was also associated with lower internalized sexual stigma ($r = -.162$, $p < .05$).
- Internalized sexual stigma was negatively associated with self-esteem ($r = -.285$, $p < .001$).
- Together, these findings suggest that ToM may relate not only to peer-network composition, but also to identity-related well-being.

Discussion

- Stronger ToM may help adolescents identify safe, supportive peers and navigate disclosure-sensitive social situations.
- Queer friends matter because they can provide affirmation, belonging, coping models, and protection from minority stress.
- Affirming peer networks may also sharpen social-perceptual skills, suggesting a potentially bidirectional relation between ToM and queer friendships.
- Practically, the findings point to the joint importance of inclusive school climates and social-cognitive supports for SGM youth.

References

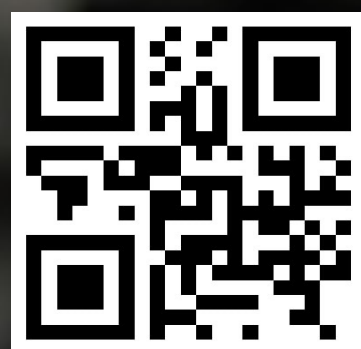
- Koerber, S., & Osterhaus, C. (2020). Some but not all aspects of (advanced) theory of mind predict loneliness. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 38, 144-148. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12302>
- Osterhaus, C., D'Urso, G., Koerber, S., & Bosacki, S. L. (2025). Theory of Mind, self-perceptions, and peer popularity in middle childhood and early adolescence. *Children*, 12(3), 281. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children12030281>
- Osterhaus, C., & Ioverno, S. (2025). Theory of mind and coming-out milestones: a study of sexual and gender minority adolescents in Germany. *International Journal of LGBTQ+ Youth Studies*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/29968992.2025.2553088>
- Russell, S. T., & Fish, J. N. (2016). Mental health in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 12(1), 465-487. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-021815-093153>

Contact

Prof. Dr. Christopher Osterhaus
Developmental Psychology in Education
University of Vechta
christopher.osterhaus@uni-vechta.de

www.costerhaus.de
www.developing-minds.de

Personal website:



Lab website:

