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Discursive representations of sexual minorities in China's English-language news media: a corpus-based study

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In contemporary China, sexual minorities (SMs) are still a marginalized community. Prior studies have accorded SMs a great deal of attention, but little research has been conducted on the representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people in Chinese English-language news media. This article uses corpus linguistic tools to examine popular views on SMs in a larger corpus of 354 news articles, filling the gap in research. Based on data collected from four English-language newspapers in mainland China and informed by discursive strategies, the article concludes that Chinese SMs are prominently represented as unhealthy individuals, but also victims and progressionists. The findings also indicate that conservative and liberal perspectives on SMs co-exist in the English-language newspapers. In addition, potential contributing factors to these representations are discussed.

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Introduction

Most WeChat public accounts about homosexuality and sexual minorities (henceforth SMs) were blocked and banned in mainland China on 6 July 2021. Some people supported the ban because homosexuality was deemed revolting. Supporters of the ban stated that homosexuality was abnormal. Others even suggested that homosexuals were spies for the United States. This shows what the prevailing social status of SMs is in China, characterized by marginalization and stigma. Indeed, recent studies (e.g., Liu, 2021a, 2021b; Zhang and Zhuang, 2023) have documented an escalation in homophobic sentiments, echoing comparable patterns in African and Islamic nations (Adegbola, 2022; Baker and Jaborooty, 2017; Kamwendo, 2015; Onanuga and Schmied, 2022; Ting et al. 2023).

Of particular note is that there prevail substantially homophobic and biased representations of SMs in China's news media. For example, Kang's (2010) work examines portraits of homosexual relationships in tabloids and sheds light on the intersection of sexuality and politics. During the warlord period from 1911 to 1927, relationships between same-sex men, especially involving high-ranking officials, were even viewed as capable of destabilizing the nation. This era also saw the coining of terms like *junzai* (military boys) for the male servants of officials, deemed to lose their masculinity and gain feminine traits. Between 1931 and 1937, Puyi's (the last Qing Dynasty emperor) reputed homosexual inclinations were depicted as aberrant, contributing to the dynasty's downfall and the subsequent Japanese invasion. On the contrary, relationships between women often garnered ambivalent societal views. Zhang (2014) analyzed articles in the *People's Daily* to investigate representations of Chinese trans-individuals after 1949. The findings indicate evolving attitudes: (1) during the Maoist era, transgenderism was suppressed, (2) it was pathologized during the reform and opening-up era, and (3) it gained legal recognition in the new millennium. The news narratives largely associate trans people with "discrimination", "distortion", and "depression".

Utilizing a discourse analytic approach, Chang and Ren (2017) explored the portrayal of gay and lesbian groups in Beijing's daily newspapers from 2010 to 2015. Their discursive analysis of 71 articles unveils varied representations of Chinese gay individuals, categorizing them as: (1) "crime victims" and inherently weak, (2) "violent subjects", (3) "enemies" of cultural values and traditions, and (4) threats to social stability. This research reinforces the contention of a clash between heterosexual norms and homosexual affection within Chinese society (Zhang and Zhuang, 2023). Notably, their findings resonate with Kang's (2010) findings, emphasizing that lesbian women in China face more acceptance than gay men. Likewise, Huang (2018) delves into discourses related to homosexuality in the *People's Daily*, the Party's official newspaper, exploring media representations of individuals with same-sex orientations in mainland China. Through a comprehensive qualitative and quantitative assessment of 188 news articles, the author identifies seven stereotypes directed at the homosexual community, which include being "criminal", "morally objectionable", "socially abnormal", "HIV/AIDS-related", "discriminatory", "mental illness-related", and "ideologically lacking".

Common among these studies is that they perpetuate the negative perceptions of SMs in Chinese-language newspapers. This aligns with media portrayals in other research contexts, like Africa (Mbaye, 2021; Oyebanji, 2023) and Southeast Asia (Goh, 2008; Kijratanakoson, 2023; Yanita and Suhardijanto, 2020). Such conservative representations bolster stereotypes and stir moral apprehension among the Chinese public, presenting SMs as "a threat to societal values and interests, and causes the concern (and often hostility) of the public and of authorities" (Litosseliti, 2007: 207).

Although above studies have contributed significantly, the research dealing with representations of SMs in China's English-language news media are lacking with one notable exception. Zhang et al. (2022) who used a discourse analysis approach to examine both textual and visual portrayals of Chinese gay individuals in two English-language newspapers from 2009 to 2019. Their conclusion is that both newspapers predominantly represent gay men negatively. While this research deserves recognition for addressing an area where most studies only consider linguistic representations and overlook a multimodal analysis, it has its limitations. It concentrates solely on a specific group of SMs in Chinese society (gay men), excluding lesbians, bisexuals, and trans individuals. The study, thus, does not adequately represent such groups, and this research approach may lead to biased perceptions of the broader Chinese SMs community. In light of this, our article aims to explore further the representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans individuals in Chinese English-language media. The objectives of this article can be outlined as follows:

- (1) To identify keywords associated with the prevalent themes of Chinese SMs in China's English-language newspapers.
- (2) To analyze discursive representations of Chinese SMs in China's English-language newspapers.
- (3) To explore potential factors shaping these representations.

Analytical framework

For our analysis, we were influenced by the discourse-historical approach proposed by Wodak (2001). Initially introduced for political analyses, scholars (such as Kijratanakoson, 2023; Peng et al. 2023; Ting et al. 2023) have used this approach to analyze issues pertaining to gender and sexuality. Wodak (2001) delineated five primary discursive strategies for representing social actors, and each can manifest through diverse devices. They include nomination, which, in this case, would refer to the names or labels given to SMs; predication, which pertains to the descriptions or attributions of SMs using evaluative expressions; argumentation, which focuses on the justification of these evaluative descriptions; perspectivation, which highlights the viewpoint these designations convey; and finally, intensification/mitigation, which examines whether and how the representations of SMs in news reports are amplified or toned down.

Another valuable theory for our news analysis is van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor-network. Ho (2020) underscores that this framework provides "various kinds of linguistic manifestations of discursive strategies and thus [is] well-suited for an investigation into the discursive representation of [SMs as] social actors" (p. 51).

Methodology

In discourse analysis, specific qualitative approaches might be susceptible to selective analysis or subjective interpretation (Widdowson, 2000). Nevertheless, over the past decade, corpus linguistics (CL) techniques have proven beneficial in addressing these concerns (see Cheng, 2013; Du, 2021). In essence, CL is a research methodology anchored in large volumes of authentic texts, deriving conclusions through probabilistic statistical analyses. This approach furnishes not only statistical data and a genuine corpus but also validates extant theories or formulates new ones. Informed by previous research that used corpus-assisted discourse analysis techniques to probe gender and sexuality in media representations (Baker and Levon, 2015; Chuaikun and Wijitsopon, 2023; Kijratanakoson, 2023; Yu, 2023; Zottola, 2021), the following steps were taken.

Step 1: Research contextualization. The point of departure was a 2021 trending topic regarding the controversial decision to ban WeChat public accounts associated with SMs. This action provided insight into the social status of SMs in China. Subsequently, a brief review of prior studies highlighted the representations of SMs in Chinese news media. This examination led to the recognition of research gaps and the formulation of specific research objectives.

Step 2: Corpus compilation. To better understand our analysis, one must first acquaint oneself with China’s news media system. The system “dictates that all newspapers be owned by the party/state” (Chang and Ren, 2017). Acting as a potent extension of the government, the news media notably benefit from the government’s financial backing. Our research drew data from four major online news publications: *Beijing Review*, *China Daily*, *Global Times*, and *Shanghai Daily*.

The choice of *China Daily* and *Global Times* stemmed from their significant sales, expansive circulation, vast readership, and better reputation compared with other English-language newspapers in the country. Recognized as influential and authoritative nationally, these two newspapers have evolved considerably since their beginnings in 1981 and 1993, respectively, as crucial platforms for global readers seeking a deeper understanding of contemporary China. On the other hand, *Beijing Review* and *Shanghai Daily* were incorporated into the study due to their regional significance. This makes them fitting complements to national newspapers, especially considering China’s distinct state media framework, where each news outlet has demarcated scopes and target audiences. When addressing social and lifestyle topics, these two publications possess greater discursive freedom compared to *China Daily* and *Global Times* and operate with “a certain degree of autonomy in operation” (Chang and Ren, 2017: 323).

Furthermore, as Yu et al. (2022) highlight, English-language news media in China typically adopt a more liberal stance than their Chinese-language counterparts do. The English-language newspapers are inclined to showcase “diverse representations and voices” concerning sensitive and contentious topics (p. 4), as they feature a “moderate approach to news reporting” (Guo and Huang, 2002: 222).

In light of the above, we used purposive sampling to gather news articles related to Chinese SMs from each publication’s website. Our exploration was confined to a 20-year span, from January 2001 (when the *Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders in China* deleted homosexuality from the psychosis category) to December 2021 (the initiation of our research). The period in question was also marked by pivotal events pertaining to Chinese LGBT communities. These included the censorship of homosexual content in the media, the emergence of a transgender celebrity as the host of Chinese TV programs, the establishment of LGBT-focused non-governmental organizations, the introduction of the ban on anti-LGBT conversion therapy, and Le Geng’s reception as a gay representative by the former Prime Minister. Additionally, the period witnessed a notable custody case involving lesbian partners, movements for the legalization of same-sex marriages in China, the inaugural gay-lesbian film festival organized by Peking University, the rise in popularity of gay and lesbian social media platforms in China, and Xixi’s legal challenges against homophobic textbooks. Throughout this timeframe, every news report was searched, cataloged, and considered as a potential research material.

We conducted a search using these specific key terms: *tongxinglian*, homosexual, homosexuality, lesbian, gay, bisexual,

Table 1 Frequency of search terms.

Terms	Ranks	Frequencies
gay	1	2197
LGBT	5	856
homosexual	13	441
lesbian	18	388
transgender	26	254
bisexual	42	143

On the ranking list of top 100 keywords.

Table 2 Composition of the news corpus.

Newspapers	URL	Articles	Words
<i>Beijing Review</i>	http://www.bjreview.com/	14	9553
<i>China Daily</i>	http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/	168	122,499
<i>Global Times</i>	https://www.globaltimes.cn/	153	155,570
<i>Shanghai Daily</i>	https://www.shine.cn/	19	18,111

transgender, LGBT, and sexual minorities to retrieve relevant news articles from the mentioned websites. Some term frequencies are listed in Table 1. The search yielded 441 articles. Upon conducting a rigorous analysis of each article, we determined that 87 of them had no direct relevance to SMs despite featuring the specified terms. This resulted in a final count of 354 news articles comprising 305,733 words, as detailed in Table 2.

Step 3: Keyword analysis. Common CL techniques encompass keyword analysis, concordance, frequency, and collocation studies. In particular, the emphasis on keyword and frequency evaluation enables general readers to discern which lexical or grammatical words have the most statistically significant usage in news reports to represent SMs.

Prior to undertaking the keyword analysis, it is essential to produce a wordlist. This list enumerates all words and their respective frequencies and is created by leveraging the target and reference corpora. Subsequently, the wordlists from these corpora are compared, leading to the creation of a keyword list. This process, bolstered by a statistical test performed by the CL software, results in a ranked keyword list based on the keyness values of each word. Such a method illuminates not only the prominence of specific words within the corpora but also suggests “the most dominant discourses as [keywords] are the most salient words in a corpus” (Yu, 2023: 410).

Since keyword analysis necessitates a substantial reference corpus, this article employed the British National Corpus¹ (BNC) as a benchmark for generating a list of keywords. Completed in 1994, the BNC stands as one of the world’s largest and most representative corpora. It encompasses a vast selection of 100 million words, approximately 90% from written sources and 10% from spoken ones. The BNC captures language data from diverse text genres, spanning newspapers, books, essays, government debates, and talk shows, from a synchronic perspective (i.e., the late 20th century of British English). In this sense, the materials in BNC serve as a suitable reference corpus for conducting keyword analysis because of its representativeness and larger size.

Step 4: Qualitative analysis. This step examined chunks of news text containing the keywords identified in Step 3. This examination was carried out using the discursive strategies previously mentioned. These illuminate how Chinese SMs have been named, labeled, described, and depicted in the news media.

Table 3 Top 100 keywords of the news corpus.

Rank	Keyword	Rank	Keyword	Rank	Keyword	Rank	Keyword
1	gay	26	transgender	51	public	76	official
2	china	27	community	52	social	77	marry
3	hiv	28	xiao	53	group	78	cheng
4	chinese	29	men	54	married	79	patients
5	lgbt	30	prevention	55	gender	80	sexuality
6	aids	31	their	56	yang	81	ngos
7	homosexuality	32	discrimination	57	xu	82	infected
8	said	33	percent	58	year	83	health
9	people	34	rights	59	accept	84	acceptance
10	sex	35	yuan	60	son	85	media
11	beijing	36	wu	61	has	86	ministry
12	sexual	37	liu	62	guangdong	87	boyfriend
13	homosexual	38	society	63	blued	88	festival
14	shanghai	39	according	64	website	89	friends
15	parents	40	chen	65	global	90	han
16	homosexuals	41	geng	66	plfag	91	mainland
17	li	42	bisexual	67	treatment	92	wei
18	lesbian	43	lu	68	online	93	ngo
19	zhang	44	weibo	69	peng	94	users
20	marriage	45	university	70	hu	95	education
21	lesbians	46	told	71	are	96	children
22	wang	47	many	72	center	97	yinhe
23	gays	48	mental	73	yu	98	support
24	province	49	disease	74	heterosexual	99	about
25	orientation	50	guangzhou	75	family	100	app

Results

Keyword analysis. This study employed the AntConc 3.5.8 software, developed by Anthony (2019), to investigate the keywords shaping the discourses pertaining to Chinese SMs. This software is frequently utilized in quantitative research, offering capabilities such as generating concordance lines/plots, clusters, collocates, and keywords. The study produced a list of pertinent keywords by contrasting the target corpus comprised 354 news reports (see Table 2) with the BNC serving as its reference corpus. Based on the keyness score and for the sake of an efficient discourse analysis, only the most salient 100 keywords are examined and listed in Table 3. This list of keywords served a dual purpose, highlighting “lexical items that can warrant further examination”, but also showing “a measure of saliency” (Baker, 2006: 125) and signifying the “outstandingness of a given word” (Yu, 2023: 409). Subsequently, these keywords extracted from the news corpus underwent comparison and categorization using a USAS semantic tagger².

Analyses conducted using a semantic tagger indicate that SMs are predominantly depicted as individuals with health problems, often associated with disease and illness. This perception is reinforced by the frequent occurrence of keywords, including “hiv” (mentioned 1000 times), “aids” (930 times), health” (340 times), “prevention” (282 times), “disease” (253 times), “treatment” (217 times), “patients” (188 times), “mental” (187 times), and “infected” (131 times). Another semantic category surfaces in the context of equal citizen rights, representing SMs as victims. This is evident through keywords like “parents” (676 times), “marriage” (534 times), “family” (426 times), “rights” (376 times), “orientation” (314 times), “married” (248 times), “discrimination” (229 times), and “marry” (134 times). Progressionists as the third category associates SMs with joyous activities, highlighting their roles in advancing social progress on LGBT-related issues. Keywords that emphasize this representation include “university” (360 times), “center” (292 times), “online” (234 times), “website” (138 times), “ngos” (98 times), “blued” (96 times), “ngo” (78 times), and “app” (70 times). The fourth category labeled as

“sluts” presents SMs as individuals with promiscuous tendencies, often perceived to engage in unfaithful and unhealthy sexual lifestyles or activities. The pattern of this representation is evident from keywords such as “sex” (888 times), “sexual” (677 times), “users” (112 times), and “boyfriend” (105 times).

Qualitative analysis. Due to spatial constraints, we shall focus on three primary semantic categories from the keyword list. Departing from these categories and informed by the previously mentioned discursive strategies, we aim to tackle the second research objective in the manner outlined below:

Sexual minorities as unhealthy individuals. The news articles within this section linking SMs to physical, mental, or psychiatric issues have a tendency to depict them as unhealthy. Notably, Chinese SMs face allegations of “spreading HIV/AIDS”. From our review of the journalistic arguments on SMs, it becomes evident that many of these articles associate HIV/AIDS with Chinese gay men³ in particular, as demonstrated by Figs. 1 and 2. In this regard, Extracts 1 to 3 illustrate the representation of SMs as sexually compromised.

Extract 1 highlights a significant HIV infection rate within the Chinese non-heterosexual community, emphasizing the figure of “82 percent” through the strategy of intensification. This percentage serves two purposes: it strengthens the journalist’s credibility and intends to convey that SMs possess intense sexual urges. The narrative suggests that this sexual behavior diverges from what is deemed “natural”. Metaphorically, contracting HIV is depicted as a “logical” consequence of abnormal behaviors. This metaphor contributes to delegitimizing same-sex relations in China. It is framed more as a chosen behavior rather than an intrinsic identity, evident in the term “acts of homosexuality”. Furthermore, the metaphor insinuates that engaging in homosexual behavior is not merely injurious to the individuals involved, but poses a broader threat to the fabric of Chinese society.

at Qingdao University and expert on	HIV	/AIDS prevention and homosexuality	The gay movement
why and how to use condoms properly. But	HIV	/AIDS prevention among homosexuals, who currently suffer	
the rate of	HIV	infections among gay men. According to AIDS prevention	
Professor Zhang Beichuan, an expert on	HIV	/AIDS prevention and homosexuality, estimates China's	
gay man, who heads a civil organization in	HIV	/AIDS prevention and control, said: "Zhang's estimation is	

Fig. 1 Concordances of "HIV". Some examples from the news corpus.

decidedly chilling directions. A set of	AIDS	prevention posters aimed at male homosexuals, recently	
sensitivity to male homosexuals. Previous	AIDS	prevention posters and brochures designed for the public	
experts as saying. One of the series of	AIDS	prevention posters depicts two gays walking hand-in-hand	
group to disseminate information on	AIDS	prevention among high-risk gay groups. The group's	
the public had been rigid and impersonal.	AIDS	prevention advertisements targeted at gays should be	

Fig. 2 Concordances of "AIDS". Some examples from the news corpus.

said that the vast majority of elderly	gay	people in China are still closeted. Many of them	
by the Ministry of Health placed the number of	gay	people in China at around 10 million. The actual	
4 percent of the population, the number of	gay	people in China could range from 39 million to 52	
prevention, estimated the real number of	gay	people in China as 30 million. "But the number of	
rights organization - only 6.29 percent of	gay	people in China choose to be open about their	
Experts estimate that the number of	gay	people in China could be as many as 30 million,	
Lemay told media that 80 percent of the	gay	people in the city were forced into marriage by	

Fig. 3 Concordances of the term "gay". Some examples from the news corpus.

- (1) In the first 10 months of last year, the estimated number of new [HIV] infections on the Chinese mainland among people aged 15–24 exceeded 14,000. Roughly, 82 percent of the infections resulted from acts of homosexuality. (*Beijing Review*, 04/08/2016).
- (2) The update indicates three new trends. Sexual transmission accounts for 94.2 percent of the new infections. Of this, 27.5 percent of the infections occurred due to sex amongst homosexuals. (*Beijing Review*, 15/12/2016).

Extract 2 employs an aggregation strategy, highlighted through the statistics "27.5 percent", to draw public scrutiny to the connection between HIV and SMs. This association fosters a stereotype suggesting that (1) HIV primarily originates from same-sex relationships, and (2) many SMs are virus carriers. In addition, it is has been observed that when covering stories about gay men, news reports frequently utilize this aggregation strategy, as illustrated in Fig. 3. Styles of reporting such as this can lead to a negative-other representation that, while many hands provide great strength, the "malevolent" individuals instead inflict significant damage on society. This observation is consistent with previous arguments that news journalists more readily quantify marginalized groups in order to exaggerate their potential harm to society (Efe, 2019).

- (3) Yang Feng, a worker from a center for disease control in Yuncheng city, North China's Shanxi province, suggested gays take safety precautions when having sex, as sexual transmission is the main cause of HIV transmission among them. (*China Daily*, 19/12/2014).

Extract 3 uses an "expert" legitimization (van Leeuwen, 2008: 107), referencing Yang's speech through an indirect quotation. Gay men are represented in a passive role, anticipated to be

listeners and adherents to expert guidelines concerning HIV prevention. Simultaneously, gay individuals are portrayed actively, considering that prevention – both before and during sexual encounters – contributes to reducing, if not eliminating, the transmission of HIV. The extract further utilizes a plural pronoun to distinguish between the infected gay population and the uninfected heterosexual individuals. The differentiation underscores a contrast between negative representations of the "Other" and positive portrayals of the "Self". Apart from being perceived as a mere physical ailment, SMs are also associated with various mental disorders, as depicted in the subsequent news excerpts.

- (4) But there is a misconception that does annoy Chu. "I can't bear those people who think transgender people have some sort of treatable mental disorder. Like last year on a CCTV show, a psychiatrist claimed to have treated a transgender with hypnotherapy and 'cured' him – that's absurd," she said. (*Global Times*, 03/07/2016).

From our perspective, two aspects of Extract 4 warrant deeper examination. First, the journalist relies on Halliday's (1994) material process realized by the verb "annoy" to introduce the story. The "actor" is the abstract noun "misconception" that can lead individuals to hold negative associations regarding transsexuality. The "goal" here is Chu, the news story's protagonist, who has been burdened by the widespread misconception that transsexuals are mentally unstable. The modal verb, cannot, is notably used to convey an interpersonal stance, indicating Chu's emotions build up to an intolerable level. And second, the entire trans community is portrayed as passive, as if they were mentally unhealthy and in need of treatment. A predication strategy, represented by the adjective "absurd", is deployed to counter this

declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 2001. Equal	treatment	of gay people is a basic
by offering the false medical advice that gay people need	treatment	, said Geng Le, director of
are psychological counseling agencies providing various kinds of	treatment	to LGBT people. The third version
therapist 10 years ago to "cure" him of his homosexuality. Only after	treatment	- not before -
10 days on its website for a promotion - "providing professional	treatment	to homosexuals" - and for the
true that some transgender people needed psychiatrist help but this	treatment	was not about changing their gender
homosexual people are forced by their parents to receive medical	treatment	so have their sexual orientation

Fig. 4 Concordances of "treatment". Some examples from the news corpus.

Xiao Zhen (pseudonym) after trying to "cure	" his homosexuality with electroshock therapy.
with hospitals and researching ways to "cure	" homosexuality online. In October, Quan was
Hebe Province said that its doctors could "cure	" homosexuality through acupuncture and by taking
Though previously widely deployed as a "cure	" for homosexuality, the American Psychological
Stealth treatment Many clinics claiming to "cure	" homosexuality are repeatedly asking victims to
counseling center claimed to be able to "cure	" homosexuality and later gave him electro-shock
some professionals continue to provide a "cure	for which has been judged not to be an

Fig. 5 Concordances of "cure". Some examples from the news corpus.

distorted attitude. It should be mentioned that such misrepresentations are not solely directed at the trans community. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find news reports that wrongfully label gay and lesbian individuals as mentally ill, highlighted by the concordance lines of "treatment" and "cure" in Figs. 4, 5. On a brighter note, the journalist allows Chu, as a trans individual, to challenge and refute the misleading statements made by the so-called "expert" on China's official television program.

- (5) Also from Chongqing, mother Xiao Li said she was once extremely excited on learning there was a clinic in the city that specialized in "treating" homosexuality. "The 'doctor' asked that both my daughter and I attend. It was going to take three sessions to complete the 'treatment' and it cost 24,000 yuan (\$3864)." (*Global Times*, 30/06/2014).

Using a layperson's perspective, Extract 5 highlights two intriguing points that advocate for viewing lesbianism as a medical condition by directly quoting a mother. Initially, her evolving views are accentuated in this story. In particular, the choice of the adjective "excited" through the abstraction strategy conveys an underlying negative implication: heightened enthusiasm about the said treatment corresponds to increased ignorance, discrimination, and apprehension toward same-sex sexuality and SMs. Subsequently, the high costs and the regular schedule for treatments imply that, in a medical context, same-sex sexuality is perceived in contemporary China as akin to an ailment that can be remedied.

Sexual minorities as victims. Another notable semantic category evident from the keywords list frequently portrays SMs as victims, confronting them with topics such as marriage, LGBT rights, family, education, and children.

- (6) "I offered him two choices - continue to be a teacher without disclosing his sexual orientation, or write a resignation letter and accept compensation," Wei said. "And he chose to write the letter." "Wei told me directly to stop my work the next day," he said. "And Wei said I had to write the letter if I wanted to get all the compensation." (*China Daily*, 14/11/2018).

Extract 6 stands as a case study illustrating news representation of gay people as victims in Chinese workplace. The central

narrative revolves around a male teacher who, upon revealing his sexual orientation as gay, is terminated from his position. Such an outcome is both anticipated and understandable, given that the protagonist confronts the prevailing heteronormativity that "promotes gender conventionality, heterosexuality, and family traditionalism as the correct way for people to be" (Oswald et al. 2005: 143). Confronted with this dilemma, the protagonist is afforded two choices. The first is a more severe outcome, where he is dismissed without any additional benefits. Conversely, while appearing more compassionate, the second option offers him compensation contingent on his "voluntary" resignation. The latter alternative serves as a facade designed to shield the employer from censure.

Notably, this extract seems to deploy an activation strategy emphasizing the gay man's willing departure from his job. However, an underlying negative narrative emerges from the perspective of the gay individual: this man is actually passivated in this case, as he is essentially coerced into trading his resignation letter for severance benefits. He does not emerge victorious in the scenario despite the receipt of these benefits. Such an outcome may further deter SMs from openly expressing their sexual orientations in the workplace. The inclusion of the modal verb "had to" is striking, underscoring the notion that the resignation was less a choice and more an obligation aimed at securing the rights and benefits he was entitled to as a qualified employee.

- (7) [Beijing LGBT] center was asked to move from a community near the North Third Ring Road, Chaoyang district, following neighbors' complaints. They had just finished decorating, after being evicted from the previous location in March. They must leave at the end of July. Local residents claimed that the LGBT individuals in close proximity to their children would impact their children's development, and the landlord was "accused of being a sympathizer with LGBT people," said the announcement. (*Global Times*, 13/06/2012).

Extract 7 relates to the story of *mengmu sanqian* (孟母三迁 the three-times resettlement by Mencius' mother). This narrative, however, is replete with the frequent use of the passivation strategy to portray Chinese SMs. For example, while SMs are

depicted as proactive in fostering LGBT enterprises, they are often portrayed in a passive light, while being compelled to vacate their rented homes repeatedly. Intriguingly, it is the grievances of neighbors that prompt SMs to abandon their houses. Indeed, this is not the first instance where people have attempted to delegitimize SMs, claiming they set poor precedents for the younger generation (Patrona, 2020). A fallacy has emerged from the notion that residing with headmasters ensures children's success, whereas living adjacent to SMs will dim children's prospects. To clarify, while three parties are stressed in this news extract – SMs, neighbors, and landlords – they represent two opposing stances in mainland China: pro- and anti-homosexuality. Essentially, the crux of this issue remains the tension between non-heterosexual and heterosexual individuals. We will continue to examine the media representations of SMs as victims through Extracts 8 to 11.

- (8) Last year, students from various Guangzhou universities coordinated to raise the rainbow flag on campuses across the city. But at 5 pm, three volunteers were suddenly detained by the police and taken to local police bureau for questioning. On the second day, more gay volunteers were “invited” into school offices “to talk,” according to Cindy. (*Global Times*, 16/05/2018).

Extract 8 describes a “brave” activity scheduled to occur in a southern city of China. However, due to intervention by the authorities, the activity is halted before it could be performed. The arrest of three volunteers in this story indicates that their intended activities are illegal in China. This shows a pragmatic implication: those loyal to the government are protected by the law, while those in opposition will face consequences. The implication here reinforces the delegitimization of LGBT-related activities, as echoed by the Chinese proverb *shajijinghou* (杀鸡儆猴) to punish a few as a warning to the rest). Additionally, two strategies are used: the functionalization strategy embodied by “gay volunteers” and the aggregation strategy realized by “more”. Both discursive strategies lend support to the fact that, despite a significant number of SMs engaging in such activities, they remain subordinate to the prevailing powers, a sentiment captured by another proverb *gebo ningbuguo datui* (胳膊拧不过大腿) the weaker cannot contend with the stronger).

- (9) He accused his teacher Chen Feng and father of beating him with sticks and fists for a long time, which caused him to be autistic and paranoid. (*Global Times*, 16/05/2019).

Extract 9 depicts the ordeal of a gay student who gets victimized, by relying on prevalent beliefs in China: (1) teachers should exemplify virtue, guiding students rightly and fulfilling their societal roles, and (2) Chinese parents ought to set examples, concurrently upholding their familial responsibilities. Ironically, the victim, rather than receiving support about his sexual orientation, suffers harm from both his teacher and his father, the individuals who should have helped him. The inflicted pain is both physical and emotional. The abstraction strategy, exemplified by the adjectives, “autistic” and “paranoid”, underscores an intense anguish. From a broader sense, this extract highlights society's unwelcoming and adverse stance toward SMs. It is also pertinent to mention the aggregation strategy employed to associate both father and teacher, given that they represent a minor segment of those opposing and resisting SMs. However, addressing this societal discord should be prioritized, necessitating collaborative societal efforts.

- (10) Off campuses, the civil affairs authorities also have not allowed any LGBT organizations to officially register as NGOs. Xiang tried to register the Tongai Network last year. But the civil affairs department of Hunan Province rejected

his application saying “there is no legal basis for establishing a homosexual organization,” and “homosexuality is against traditional Chinese culture and morality.” (*Global Times*, 15/07/2015).

In Extract 10, we first analyzed the news title: “Student LGBT Groups Struggle for Approval from China’s University Authorities.” This title naturally piques readers’ curiosity, given that the journalist tends to deploy various strategies to convey specific attitudes toward SMs in China. Firstly, the employment of an identification strategy, manifested by two nouns (“student” and “LGBT”) underscores the distinct identities of the main characters in this scenario. This brings to mind a case presented by Nisco (2018), which similarly features protagonists – gay refugees – possessing unique statuses and identities, because both groups exist as a small portion of the marginalized LGBT community. Moreover, selecting the verb phrase in this title is noteworthy and evocative. The journalist opts for the emotionally charged “struggle for” over milder alternatives like “ask for” or “strive for”. This choice paints a vivid picture of the dire circumstances facing Chinese LGBT students. While, at first glance, the news title highlights the students’ relentless advocacy efforts, such as mentioning the Tongai Network, it subtly puts them into a passive role constrained by officialdom. Essentially, their efforts are futile without the permission of the authorities.

Upon a closer examination of this news extract, it is evident that although two parties (SMs and the official) are mentioned, the former is featured as the central figure. The activation strategy presents the fervor of SMs championing LGBT causes. Regrettably, they are denied the agency to spearhead these initiatives, casting gay students in a victimized light, especially given the absence of legal safeguards for LGBT organizations at the time. It thus passivates gay students as victims. In light of Xiang’s experiences, it also becomes evident to readers that the official turning to the law authority as the self-legitimization strategy, while concurrently delegitimizing same-sex sexuality by referencing the authority of tradition (van Leeuwen, 2008). Such strategies exonerate the officials from any accountability but cast a shadow over the reputation of SMs.

Extract 11 further introduces a case study focusing on trans individual with considerable challenges in altering their Chinese ID. After our initial reading, two salient points stood out. The first, termed *sixunhuan* (死循环) an endless loop), emphasizes that no entity assisted Chen in changing their ID. The second draws attention to the prevailing legal framework, implying that currently, there is no legislation guaranteeing the amendment of Chen’s ID. This legal void hints at a broader concern: SMs cannot engage in same-sex marriage or assert inheritance rights until the corresponding laws are enacted. This is reflected by the fact that an increasing cohort of scholars, LGBT rights proponents, and SMs advocate that the Party-State should consider and legalize same-sex marriages (Liu and Zhu, 2020).

- (11) “The police said I needed a statement from a hospital proving my sex reassignment before they could change my ID. But when I went to a hospital, because I had had the operation abroad no one was willing to sign a statement. The hospital said it could be illegal and that there were no Ministry of Health regulations that allowed them to issue a statement like that. Neither the police nor the hospital wanted to accept the responsibility and I had no idea what I could do,” Chen said. (*Global Times*, 03/07/2016).

Upon a closer second reading of the extract, we discern a deeper narrative layer: the representation of Chen as a victim. Firstly, the strategy of activation accentuates Chen’s valor in undergoing a sex-change operation. Regrettably, readers are not privy to Chen’s genuine desires regarding the surgery or its

potential aftermath⁴. In addition, a passivation strategy underscores Chen's tumultuous journey to change the ID. Delving deeper into this narrative, a football metaphor elucidates Chen's predicament. Chen, the protagonist, is likened to a footballer, with civil servants, epitomized by the "police" and "doctor", being the football referees. From the given perspective, undergoing a transsexual operation can be likened to scoring a goal, while the refusal of the operation by the Chinese police and hospitals is akin to a referee failing to blow the whistle. In particular, the choice of the verb phrase "accept the responsibility" carries an implicit connotation: every individual should comply with China's laws. In other words, if misjudging Chen's case, the civil servants in this scenario will face repercussions for breaching it. Another interpretation of the metaphor is that changing Chen's ID represents a soccer ball, while civil servants correspond to soccer players in the game. In this context, having Chen's ID changed is equivalent to scoring a goal. Thus, it could be inferred from Chen's perspective that officials would rather not score than change their ID. And ironically, it is a common feeling that players are in high expectation of scoring more goals during games.

van Leeuwen's (2008) legitimation strategy through comparison also emerges in this narrative, juxtaposing two extremes: the absence of a need to validate transsexual operations conducted overseas against the mandated requirement of such certificates by Chinese officials. This contrast reveals the truths: (1) readers are more inclined to sympathize with Chen due to their perceived vulnerability, and (2) there is a hesitance to chastise civil servants for their stringent and seemingly indifferent stance, as China upholds the principle of the rule of law. There is a prevailing sentiment that legal adherence fosters societal harmony. An entrenched bias, however, is evident in Extract 11, suggesting that sex changes in China are deemed a sign of illness, inferred from the presupposition that healthy individuals have no reasons to seek medical attention.

Sexual minorities as progressionists. In the news reports examined in this section, SMs are represented as progressionists, given their courageous efforts toward achieving equal citizen rights and their astute involvement in LGBT-related activities. Here are some examples:

- (12) Scared and embarrassed, Wang resigned. She started her own company, implementing an openly LGBT-friendly policy. About one-third of her employees are sexual minorities. (*Shanghai Daily*, 29/07/2020).

Extract 12 is drawn from a news article in the *Shanghai Daily* representing SMs as progressive people. This representation is primarily crafted using several discursive strategies. The first strategy, known as activation, portrays Wang as a lesbian woman with a keen inclination toward self-improvement. Beyond her role as the leader, Wang is portrayed actively, primarily through the verb "implement", signaling her drive to foster a unique work atmosphere for fellow sexual minorities. Such a portrayal evokes the familiar Chinese proverb: adversity sharpens one's wisdom. The strategy of predication is then exemplified by the descriptor "LGBT-friendly", alluding to a forthcoming workspace free from discrimination, oppression, shame, hate, and secrecy. The third strategy, aggregation, is underscored by the term "one-third" here. This quantifier conveys an optimistic sentiment, indicating that Wang's new company has become a haven, a sanctuary where SMs can pursue their dreams and create wealth.

- (13) The organization Cindy is part of registered in 2006 at a university in Guangzhou, becoming the first school club that focused specifically on LGBT topics. Since then, they

have been trying to hold activities and raise their rainbow flag on May 17 every year. (*Global Times*, 16/05/2018).

Extract 13 portrays Chinese SMs as progressionists by highlighting their courage in founding LGBT-related organizations. There are several points in this context that merit further attention. First, the date referenced in the news extract is noteworthy, as it predates the recent era of increased tolerance for SMs. In those times, establishing an organization such as "Cindy" was a bold move, signaling the pursuit of equal rights. Secondly, the emphasis on university students as the central figures evokes memories of the May 4th Movement in 1919, initiated by students in Beijing. This parallel reinforces the notion that students in China have historically been at the forefront of innovative ideas. The third point touches on a specified location, Guangzhou (a keyword in Table 3), referred to in the extract. Historically, Guangdong province, especially Shenzhen, has spearheaded China's reforms dating back to the Qing Dynasty. Residents have a reputation for being open-minded and keeping up with international trends. Therefore, it is no surprise that an organization like this would thrive in Guangzhou. And lastly, the progressive and liberal image of SMs is intensified by using the adjunct "every year". Of note is that the mention of annual "rainbow activities" underscores two vital inferences. First, people champion causes they deem valuable; otherwise, it would be an exercise in futility. Second, through relentless commitment, SMs would ultimately achieve their quest for equal citizen rights.

- (14) Blued announced on Sunday that it would close new registrations for a week, and intensify supervisory measures, including relying on technology and manpower to cancel accounts held by minors. (*China Daily*, 08/01/2019).

Extract 14 delves into corporate social responsibility in China, spotlighting the gay community-associated corporation Blued. Mr. Geng Le has long been the CEO of Blued. The app's inception aimed to foster interactions among gay men (Lu, Zhang, and Zhang, 2023). While Blued has similarities with Western social apps, it seamlessly blends Chinese elements. Regular updates introduce features like live-streaming that enhances user experiences. However, Blued faced criticism because of blackmail incidents, intentional HIV/AIDS transmission via the app, and the monetization of formerly free programs. Concerns also arise about misleading users under 18, as shown in this extract. Blued recognized that there are areas for improvement. Using the strategy of activation, this case emphasizes that Blued, similar to other companies, remains committed to its responsibility, resisting its being delegitimized in China.

- (15) Xi's initiation to the gay community came online when he found the nonprofit Queer Comrades center in Beijing. The center held an exhibition of his paper cuttings in 2009 during the Queer Film Festival and Sexual Diversity Art Festival.

"People reacted very well to my art. There were homosexuals and lesbians in tears who thanked me for showing same-sex love in my paper cuttings," he said. (*Global Times*, 09/08/2012).

Extract 15 is developed by focusing on an exhibition of paper cuttings with a unique theme centered on queer subjects. The use of aggregation strategy symbolizes how SMs seek mutual "warmth", as the exhibition was curated by and for SMs. In addition, an activation strategy highlights the SMs' passion for the exhibition's setup. The event gained significant praise, with the choice of "very" intensifying empathy among Chinese SMs. Finally, the term "in tears" emphasizes the report's authenticity.

- (16) "The local police told us to cancel the show a day before it was due to open, because they claimed it contained obscene

and violent content,” said an organizer, who gave her name as Sam, and who is also editor of *les+* magazine. “We were not sure if we could go ahead until this morning. We removed several sexually explicit works, then they said the exhibition was ok.” (*Global Times*, 17/06/2009).

Extract 16 continues to introduce another exhibition of SMs. This report reveals the complexities preceding the exhibition’s launch. Unlike Extract 15, where SMs are protagonists, this extract presents a dichotomy between police officers and SMs. The tension emerges when SMs face pressure to cancel their LGBT-themed show. Legally, in China, this pressure is valid since the planned exhibition was seen as inappropriate for Chinese audiences. Thus, SMs are portrayed in line with the law. Using Halliday’s (1994) theme-rheme pattern, the news focus is evident in Sam’s latter statement about the exhibition’s timely launch. Extract 16’s analysis offers two main insights: first, an LGBT-centric exhibition’s bold and risky nature, encapsulated by the proverb *mingzhi shanyouhu pianxiang hushanxing* (明知山有虎 偏向虎山行 taking the bull by its horns). Through the use of predication strategy, the second insight depicts the lesbian as savvy, ensuring success by eliminating any illegal content.

Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on the discursive strategies, this article presents a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of SMs representations in China’s English-language media. On the one hand, our investigation corroborates previous research findings (Huang, 2018; Kang, 2010; Zhang, 2014) by spotlighting predominantly negative and conservative representation patterns of SMs. This included representing SMs as medically challenged individuals, both physically and mentally, necessitating medical treatment, and as sexually promiscuous figures leading harmful lifestyles.

On the other hand, our research illuminates the instances of more liberal and affirmative Chinese media portrayals of SMs, a dimension scarcely identified in earlier studies focusing on Chinese-language outlets. Notably, representations of SMs as victims are strategically juxtaposed with issues such as marriage rights, adoption, fair employment, freedom to organize events, domestic violence, and theft. This underscores the disparities between SMs and heterosexuals, highlighting the prejudice due to their sexual orientation. Additionally, representations of SMs as progressive agents foreground their advocacy for equal citizen rights and their proactive involvement in public welfare initiatives. The particularly positive representations of Chinese SMs can be attributed to various reasons. However, four potential factors are contemplated within the Chinese context.

Firstly, the emergence of the “Chinese Dream” combined with increased political openness has fostered a more favorable environment for positive media portrayals of SMs. The consensus is that the “Chinese Dream,” as President Xi expressed it, embodies the aspirations of every Chinese citizen, irrespective of sexual orientations. Guided by principles of freedom, equality, and the rule of law, China is steadily evolving toward an inclusive society where everyone can exercise their rights. For SMs, this transformation is a gradual and hopeful journey toward recognition as equal members of contemporary Chinese society. For example, on 6 November 2018, a Chinese delegation led by the Vice Foreign Minister participated in the third China Review Conference of the United Nations Universal Periodic Review in Geneva. This conference marked the first occasion where the Chinese government explicitly revealed its position on SMs: China upholds the health rights of LGBT individuals, allows voluntary sex reassignment surgery, and respects individual privacy.

Secondly, China’s English-language news outlets are actively addressing taboos and confronting stigmatization related to SMs. This trend suggests a growing media freedom and epitomizes “a moderate approach to news reporting” (Guo and Huang, 2002:

222). By producing news articles that challenge stereotypes and humanize LGBT individuals, these media positively influence news portrayals, enhancing empathy and understanding and prompting societal changes. They offer a broader creative latitude, presenting narratives potentially overlooked or sidestepped by the Chinese-language media. As Yu et al. (2022) demonstrated, the liberal content is more discernible in English-language news portrayals of gay and lesbian identities than in their Chinese-language counterparts. Furthermore, Chinese news outlets are not entirely detached from global media influences. Positive international media representations of SMs, through TV shows and cultural exchanges, inspire domestic media to embrace more inclusive portrayals, aiming for alignment with international standards and progressive ideals. This corroborates the earlier assertion that Chinese journalists possess a liberal and egalitarian outlook, championing “cosmopolitan worldviews, pluralistic opinions, and occasionally alternative voices” (Guo and Huang, 2002: 219).

Thirdly, the burgeoning “pink economy” enhances the positive representations of SMs in news media. As China grapples with an aging population and confronts challenges like a declining birth rate and economic slowdown, the nation’s consumer strength is gradually rebounding from the repercussions of the Pandemic. In this context, LGBT individuals, though marginalized, hold a distinctive position. They boost consumer spending and generate economic value through legitimate ventures, such as live streaming on *Blued* and tours catered to SMs. Contributing significantly to the workforce, they are perceived as injecting renewed vigor into Chinese economy. This aligns with Salahshour’s (2016) assertion that the marginalized groups, such as immigrants, can elevate their societal standing by leveraging their economic contributions.

Fourthly, the endeavors of LGBT activists and advocacy organizations also significantly influence the trajectory of news reports toward a more positive stance. Through their persistent efforts, they heighten awareness, counteract prevailing stereotypes, and collaborate with Chinese media channels to foster precise, respectful, tolerant, and inclusive representations of Chinese SMs. Notably, the endeavors and experiences of Le Geng and Yinhe Li⁵ dominate a substantial segment of these news narratives. Engaging LGBT individuals in the news creation process is pivotal in ensuring accurate and non-misleading portrayals of SMs.

In terms of future research, scholars could first explore the visual semiotic tools used to represent SMs through a multimodal lens. Such tools in media can serve as “an effective way of housing gendered discourses and ideologies” (Yu et al. 2022: 3). In addition, a comparative analysis delving into the parallels and distinctions in the portrayal of gay men and lesbian women in the Chinese media would be of value. And lastly, focusing on specific LGBT-related subjects in news media could provide insights into framing news narratives on SMs. Topics such as domestic violence, Pride Parade, same-sex marriage litigations, the issue of homophobic textbooks, and the *tongqi* phenomenon (gay man’s wife) warrant attention, because “the repetition of certain discourses can affect how [SMs] are talked and reasoned about” (Yoong and Lee, 2023: 4).

Data availability

All data analyzed are contained in this article.

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Notes

¹ <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>.

- 2 An automatic tagger for English texts designed at Lancaster University. Available from <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/corpus/index.xml>.
- 3 Worth noting is that the strategy of nomination is repeatedly used in news discourse to refer to sexual contacts between gay individuals in China, including same-sex sex, same-sex behavior, and homosexual act/contact/sex/intercourse.
- 4 Other reports in our news corpus remind the reader that trans people lost their jobs after surgery.
- 5 Two prominent figures in China who have openly revealed their sexual orientation as gay.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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