

# Homoprejudiced violence among Chinese men who have sex with men: A cross-sectional analysis in Guangzhou, China

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## Research article

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# Abstract

**Background** Homoprejudiced violence, defined as physical, verbal, psychological and cyber aggression against others because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, is an important public health issue. Most homoprejudiced violence research has been conducted in high-income countries. This study aimed to examine the experience and perpetration of homoprejudiced violence among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Guangzhou, China.

**Methods** MSM in a large Chinese city, Guangzhou, completed an online survey instrument that was distributed through community-based organizations. Descriptive analysis was conducted to describe the sample characteristics. Multivariable logistic regression analyses, controlling for age, residence, occupation, marriage, education and income, were carried out to explore associated factors.

**Results** A total of 777 men completed the survey and most (64.9%) were under the age of 30. Three-hundred-ninety-nine (51.4%) reported experiencing homoprejudiced violence, while 205 (25.9%) reported initiating homoprejudiced violence against others. Compared to respondents who self-identified as gay, respondents who were heterosexual were 0.6 times (AOR=0.6, 95% CI: 0.4-0.9) as likely to have experienced homoprejudiced violence, whereas those who were unsure about their sexual orientation were 2.6 times (AOR=2.6, 95% CI: 1.2-5.5) more likely to have experienced homoprejudiced violence before. Furthermore, a strong association (AOR=2.4, 95% CI: 1.6-3.5) was identified between experiencing homoprejudiced violence and initiating violence. MSM who had disclosed their sexual orientation to people other than their partners were more likely to have experienced homoprejudiced violence (AOR=1.8, 95% CI: 1.3-2.5).

**Conclusions** These findings suggest the importance of anti-homoprejudiced violence interventions focused on decreasing violence against MSM. Further research and actions are needed.

## Background

Homoprejudiced violence is a major public health issue (1). Homoprejudiced violence is defined as physical, verbal, psychological and cyber aggression against an individual, or a group or community based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation, that could potentially lead to suffering illnesses (2–5). Homoprejudiced violence can be directed at the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community and others who are straight but perceived to be attracted by the same sex. Likewise, it can be perpetrated by both straight and sexual minorities.

United Nation recognized homoprejudiced violence as a prevalent practice which can adversely affect victims' health and well-being (4). Homoprejudiced violence can contribute to physical and psychological harms, poorer personal productivity and achievements, and behavioral problems (e.g., substance and alcohol use) (4, 6–9). However, it is often unreported, partly because many victims are afraid of disclosing their sexual orientation due to social stigma (10) and there is a lack of awareness of how to properly deal with such incidents (9, 11).

Despite more widespread homoprejudice in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (12, 13), most research on homoprejudiced violence focused in high-income countries and there is less data from LMICs, including China (4). Second, existing evidence has a focus on sexual minority broadly (9). However, there is little attention to men who have sex with men (MSM), mostly gay men, who are facing more related stigma compared to lesbian and bisexual subgroups (14). Discrimination and homoprejudiced violence are known impeding factors to gay men's sexual orientation disclosure (6, 10, 15) and can consequently limit men's utilization of local HIV and other sexual health services (16). Homoprejudiced violence victimization during childhood and adolescence was also found to be associated with higher risk of HIV acquisition and partner abuse during adulthood (17, 18).

In addition, homoprejudiced violence perpetrated by gay men themselves remains underexplored. It is reported that perpetrators might attempt violence against other sexual minority people in order to hide their sexual orientation (9). According to Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, aggression is a feature of masculinity (19, 20). When people are confused about their own sexual orientation or feel a need to defend themselves against being the subject of violence, they might attempt aggressive behaviors to reinforce their masculinity in front of others (9). Therefore, understanding the phenomenon within the community may help shed light upon the problem.

The purpose of this study is to examine the frequency and correlates of homoprejudiced violence among MSM in Guangzhou China, which will ultimately be useful in finding solutions to reduce its occurrence.

## Material And Methods

### Online survey

With assistance from a local community-based organization (CBO) and the Center of Disease Control (CDC), we conducted a cross-sectional online questionnaire survey with 777 MSM in Guangzhou, China in September 2018. The survey was distributed online to MSM through social media platforms of CBOs and the CDC. Eligibility criteria included: 1) being biologically male at birth, 2) being 16 years old or above, 3) reported ever having anal sex with men including oral and anal sex, and 4) have been residing in Guangzhou in the past six months. All survey data were anonymous and confidential, and online consent was obtained before the commencement of the survey. Either 7.5 USD (50 Chinese Yuan) or a free HIV self-test kit was provided to participants as an incentive to participate.

### Survey instruments

We collected information about participants' sociodemographic characteristics including age, residence permit, occupation, marital status (never married, engaged or married, and divorced/separated/widowed), annual income, highest education obtained (high school or less, some college, university, and postgraduate), sexual history including gender identity (male, female, transgender, and unsure), sexual orientation (gay, bisexual, heterosexual, and unsure) and sexual orientation disclosure to people other than their partner(s) (yes/no).

### Homoprejudiced violence scale

Twelve homoprejudiced violence items were designed based on previous literature (5, 21, 22). We selected 12 items to cover the four major domains – physical assaults, verbal aggression, psychological abuse, and cyber violence. We translated and adapted the 12 items into the Chinese setting. We used the scale mainly to assess the magnitude of the problem rather than for scale validation. The 12-item homoprejudiced scale asked whether they had following violence experiences due to their sexual orientation: have been gossiped, name calling, deliberately alienated or isolated, threatened, maliciously called gay, spit on, personal belongings ever been damaged by someone, deprived of economic resources or personal belongings by someone (including family members), personal freedom ever been restricted by someone (including family members), physically harmed (such as being slapped, beaten or kicked), ever been harmed on social media (such as WeChat and Weibo, the Chinese substitutes of WhatsApp and Twitter), ever been harmed through phone calls or messages. The scale was field tested with 10 participants and minor amendments were made for better clarity.

All 12 items used three responses: "yes", "no" and "do not want to tell". We combined the 12 items to generate a new summative variable in order to evaluate the overall prevalence of homoprejudiced violence experience. Participants who responded "yes" to any of the 12 items were defined as having experienced violence before due to their sexual

orientation (outcome 1). Additionally, one follow-up item asked whether participants had ever committed any of the 12 violent behaviors aforementioned against others due to their sexual orientation (yes, no, do not want to tell) (outcome 2). The Cronbach alpha value was 0.89.

## Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was used to describe sample characteristics, including sociodemographic backgrounds and frequencies of violence experiences. The two outcomes were dichotomized for further regression analyses; i.e., the responses “no” and “do not want to tell” were grouped as one category, while the “yes” responses constituted the other category. We conducted univariate and multivariable binary logistic regressions to examine sociodemographic factors associated with homoprejudiced violence. We reported odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Data were analyzed using SPSS, version 25.

## Discussion

Homoprejudiced violence is an important yet underexplored public health issue among sexual minorities in many LMICs. Our study breaks new ground by examining this issue in an LMIC setting, focusing on MSM's experiences of homoprejudiced violence, and in the meantime, looking into MSM-initiated homoprejudiced violence.

We found that approximately half of men ever experienced some form of homoprejudiced violence. This is lower than rates of homoprejudiced violence observed in the UK (9) and US (11, 23). Lower rates of homoprejudiced violence may be related to lower rates of disclosing sexual orientation due to fear of social discrimination (24). This is consistent with previous reports which showed that increasing levels of visibility of LGBT people is associated with increasing levels of violence against the group (25, 26). Nevertheless, this is still a high rate of violence against MSM. To respond to UN's call to end violence and discrimination against LGBT people (27), immediate actions, such as awareness campaigns to reduce discrimination and stigma towards sexual minorities and anti-violence interventions, are needed in China.

We also found common MSM-initiated homoprejudiced violence; being a perpetrator of homoprejudiced violence is significantly associated with experiences of homoprejudiced violence. Previous research indicated that perpetrators can be victims themselves and the experienced homoprejudiced violence may increase the likelihood of initiating violence against others based on sexual orientation (28). It is possible that men may use violence as an approach to conceal their sexual orientation if they have been a victim of homoprejudiced violence and are afraid of being exposed repeatedly to aggressive behaviors (9). Other potential factors may include poor sexual education about how to properly cope with their sexuality, and fear of social stigma. Poor awareness of homoprejudiced violence in general might also play a role because perpetrators may be unaware of what constitutes homoprejudiced violence and treat their aggressive behaviors and manners as innocuous. Understanding the contributing factors behind the formation of violent behaviors are key to successfully creating environments where all MSM feel safe and protected from homoprejudiced violence.

Our study has implications for research and policy. There are few epidemiological studies focusing on homoprejudiced violence among MSM in LMICs. Our study provides evidence on the prevalence and correlates of homoprejudiced violence. This lays a foundation for further research into this phenomenon. In terms of designing prevention programs, some sociodemographic backgrounds are worth more attention. Our study suggested that being younger, having an urban residence permit, and openly gay men are more likely to initiate homoprejudiced violence against others. Given young gay men are more often engaged in local sexual health programs that are led by the key

community, there may be missed opportunities for engaging peer-led community-based organizations and other young gay men to develop anti-violence interventions.

Our study has some limitations. First, we conducted the survey with MSM who subscribed to the social media account of a community-based organization that provided sexual health services in a developed city in China. Our participants were relatively better educated and economically better-off. This has limited representativeness and the study results cannot be extrapolated to the wider community. Second, we combined participants' response of "no" and "don't want to tell" to homoprejudiced violence as one category. This may underestimate the prevalence of homoprejudiced violence experiences due to unwillingness to share. Third, the study focused on homoprejudiced violence, but not the broader homoprejudice experiences. It is likely that homoprejudice experiences among MSM are even more prevailing. Lastly, an online cross-sectional questionnaire survey has limited depth to fully understand men's thoughts about their own experiences. Qualitative research is warranted to better understand the issue.

## **Conclusions**

Homoprejudiced violence is an important public health problem. Our study looked into the topic by examining MSM's homoprejudiced violence experiences. We found fairly high rates of homoprejudiced violence victimization and perpetration among Chinese MSM. Sexual orientation disclosure is a significant factor correlated with both. Interventions are necessary to help men to properly deal with power relationships with other sexual minority groups while they are open about their sexual orientation and gender expression. Experiencing homoprejudiced violence may be a contributing factor for becoming a perpetrator of homoprejudiced violence. Understanding related factors is key to creating environments where MSM feel safe and protected from violence.

## **Declarations**

### **Ethical approval and consent to participate**

Ethical approval was obtained from Guangzhou Center of Diseases Control. Online informed consent was obtained prior to the commencement of the survey questionnaire.

### **List of abbreviations**

MSM = men who have sex with men

LMIC = low- and middle-income countries

### **Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

### **Availability of data and materials**

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### **Competing interests**

None declared.

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## Authors' contributions

D.W. conceived the idea and designed the study. W.H., W.T., and H.X. coordinated and collected data. W.H. cleaned the data. D.W. and E.Y. analyzed the data. D.W., E.Y., and J.D. wrote the paper. W.H., W.T., C.L., S.B., S.D., and H.X. provided constructive comments and edited the paper. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the paper.

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## Tables

**1: Sample characteristics of MSM who have experienced homoprejudiced violence/engaged in violence behavior in Guangzhou, China in 2018 (N=777)**

		Total N=777 (%)	Ever experienced homoprejudiced violence N=399 (%)	Ever perpetrated homoprejudiced violence against others N=205 (%)
Age (years)	<30	495 (64.9)	243 (62.1)	128 (63.7)
	30-39	268 (35.1)	148 (37.9)	73 (36.3)
Residence permit †	Rural	138 (17.8)	58 (14.5)	18 (8.8)
	Urban	639 (82.2)	341 (85.5)	187 (91.2)
Occupation	Non-student	718 (92.4)	369 (92.5)	197 (96.1)
	Student	59 (7.6)	30 (7.5)	8 (3.9)
Marital status	Never married	574 (73.9)	279 (69.9)	102 (49.8)
	Engaged or married	139 (17.9)	82 (20.6)	68 (33.2)
	Separated, divorced or widowed	64 (8.2)	38 (9.5)	35 (17.1)
Highest education level	High school or below	82 (10.6)	36 (9.0)	13 (6.3)
	Some college	255 (32.8)	111 (27.8)	81 (39.5)
	University or above	440 (56.7)	252 (63.2)	111 (54.2)
Annual income (USD)	<8682	231(29.7)	103 (25.8)	38 (18.5)
	8682-13024	313 (40.3)	174 (43.6)	111 (54.1)
	>13024	233 (29.9)	122 (30.6)	56 (27.4)
Sex	Male	675 (86.9)	339 (85.0)	149 (72.7)
	Female	46 (5.9)	23 (5.8)	28 (13.7)
	Transgender/unsure	39 (5.0)	37 (9.3)	28 (13.7)
Sexual orientation	Gay	447 (57.5)	222 (55.6)	90 (43.9)
	Bisexual	175 (22.5)	106 (26.6)	79 (38.5)
	Heterosexual	116 (14.9)	43 (10.8)	29 (14.1)

	Unsure/other	39 (5.0)	28 (7.0)	7 (3.4)
sexual orientation disclosure ‡	Yes	571 (73.5)	317 (79.4)	189 (92.2)
	No	378 (48.6)		68 (18.0)
experienced homophobia	Yes	399 (51.4)		137 (34.3)

%; valid percentages used

† Based on Hukou, the Chinese household registration system

‡ Sexual orientation disclosure to others besides sexual partners

**Table 2: Frequency of individual homophobic violence items n (%)**

Individual items	Yes
1. Have you ever been gossiped due to your sexual orientation?	217 (27.4)
1. Have you ever experienced name calling due to your sexual orientation?	183 (23.1)
1. Have you ever been deliberately alienated or isolated due to your sexual orientation?	200 (25.2)
1. Have you ever been threatened due to your sexual orientation?	103 (13.0)
1. Have you ever been maliciously called gay due to your sexual orientation?	190 (24.0)
1. Have you ever been spit on due to your sexual orientation?	106 (13.4)
1. Did anyone damage your personal belongings due to your sexual orientation?	102 (12.9)
1. Have you ever been deprived of economic resources or personal belongings by anyone (including your family members) due to your sexual orientation?	113 (14.2)
1. Have you ever been restricted on personal freedom by anyone (including your family members) due to your sexual orientation?	98 (12.4)
1. Have you ever been physically harmed, such as be being slapped, beaten or kicked due to your sexual orientation?	106 (13.4)
1. Have you ever been harmed on social media (such as WeChat, Weibo) due to your sexual orientation?	128 (16.1)
1. Have you ever been harmed by phone call or messages due to your sexual orientation?	126 (15.9)
Total respondents who experienced any of the above violence	399 (51.4)

**Table 3: Factors associated with experiencing homoprejudiced violence/ever violating others among MSM in Guangzhou, China, in 2018 (N=777)**

		Ever experienced homoprejudiced violence		Ever perpetrated homoprejudiced violence against others	
		COR	AOR	COR	AOR
<b>Demographic factors (AORs: including demographic variables only in the modeling)</b>					
Age (years)	<30	0.8 (0.6-1.1)	0.9 (0.6-1.2)	0.9 (0.7-1.3)	2.4 (1.5-3.8)***
	>=30	1	1	1	1
Residence permit †	Rural	1	1	1	1
	Urban	1.6 (1.1-2.3)*	1.5 (0.99-2.2)	2.8 (1.6-4.7)***	2.9 (1.6-5.2)***
Occupation	Non-student	1	1		
	Student	1.0 (0.6-1.7)	1.2 (0.7-2.2)		
Marital status	Never married	1	1	1	1
	Engaged or married	1.5 (1.0-2.2)*	1.5 (0.99-2.2)	4.4 (3.0-6.6)***	5.7 (3.6-9.1)***
	Separated, divorced or widowed	1.5 (0.9-2.6)	1.7 (0.9-2.9)	5.6 (3.3-9.6)***	9.2 (4.8-17.6)***
Highest education level	High school or below	0.6 (0.4-0.9)*	0.6 (0.4-1.1)	0.6 (0.3-1.0)	0.8 (0.4-1.6)
	Some college	0.6 (0.4-0.8)***	0.6 (0.4-0.8)	1.4 (1.0-1.9)	1.5 (0.99-2.2)
	University or above	1	1	1	1
Annual income (USD)	<8682	0.7 (0.5-1.1)	1.0 (0.6-1.5)	0.6 (0.4-0.99)*	0.6 (0.3-1.1)
	8682-13024	1.1 (0.8-1.6)	1.3 (0.9-1.9)	1.7 (1.2-2.5)**	1.7 (1.1-2.6)*
	>13024	1	1	1	1
<b>AORs: controlling for age, residence permit, occupation, marital status, education level, and monthly income</b>					
Gender identity	Male	1	1	1	1
	Female	1.0 (0.5-1.8)	0.9 (0.5-1.7)	5.5 (3.0-10.2)***	3.0 (1.5-6.2)**
	Transgender/unsure	1.9(1.1-3.4)*	1.6 (0.9-3.0)	3.5 (2.0-6.1)***	2.2 (1.2-4.2)*
Sexual orientation	Gay	1	1		
	Bisexual	1.6 (1.1-2.2)*	1.2 (0.8-1.8)		

	Heterosexual	0.6 (0.4-0.9)*	0.6 (0.4-0.9)*		
	Unsure/other	2.6 (1.3-5.3)*	2.6 (1.2-5.5)*		
Sexual orientation disclosure †	No	1	1	1	1
	Yes	1.9 (1.4-2.6)***	1.8 (1.3-2.5)**	5.9 (3.4-10.1)***	5.7 (3.2-10.2)***
Ever experienced homophobic prejudice	No			1	1
	Yes			2.4 (1.7-3.3)***	2.4 (1.6-3.5)***

COR: Crude odds ratio; AOR: Adjusted odds ratio

† Based on Hukou, the Chinese household registration system

‡ Sexual orientation disclosure to others besides sexual partners

\*: p-value<0.05; \*\*: p-value<0.01; \*\*\*: p-value<0.00

## Figures

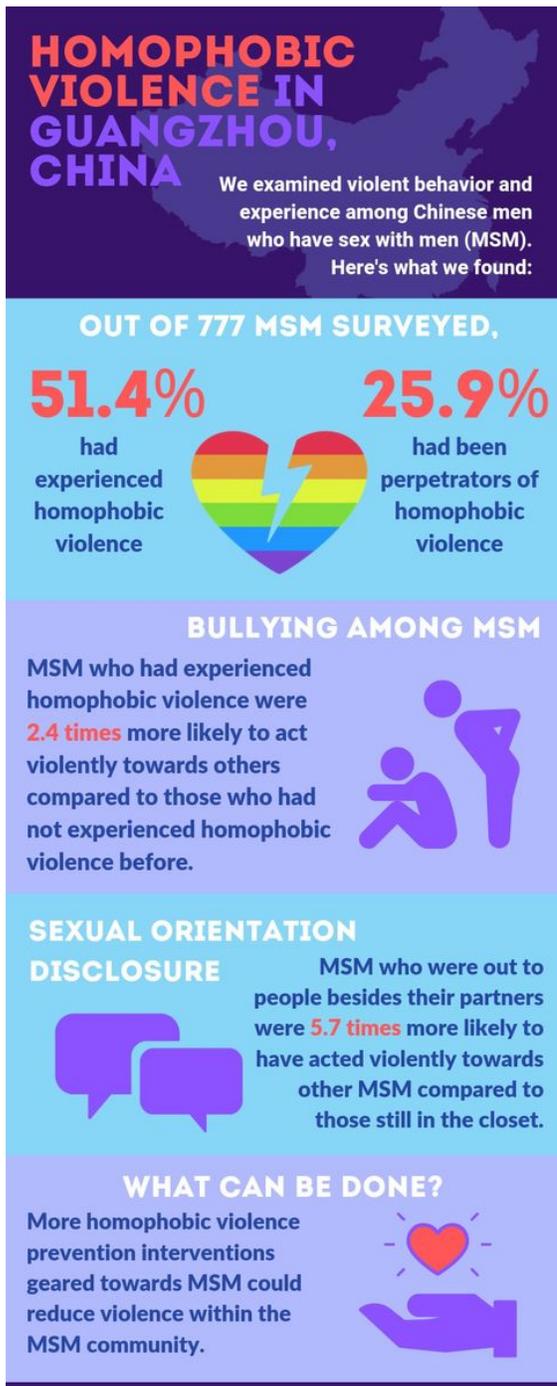


Figure 1

Infographic of homoprejudiced violence in Guangzhou, China