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

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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, heterosexual marriage, education and income, were carried out to explore associated factors. Results A total of 777 responses were analyzed 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 research and the implementation of interventions focused on preventing and mitigating the effects of homoprejudiced violence affecting MSM in China.
Background

Homoprejudiced violence is a major public health issue (1). Homoprejudiced violence is defined as physical, verbal, psychological, and cyber aggression against an individual, group or community based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation (2-6).

Homoprejudiced violence can be directed at the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community and others who identify as heterosexual but are perceived by others as being gay or otherwise members of the LGBT communities.

The United Nations (UN) has recognized homoprejudiced violence as a prevalent practice which can adversely affect victims’ health and well-being (4). In addition, homoprejudiced violence can contribute to physical and psychological harms, poorer personal productivity, and increased risk of addictions (e.g., substance and alcohol use) (4, 6-9). However, this form of violence is often un- or under-reported, partly because many victims are afraid of disclosing their sexual orientation due to social stigmas (10) combined with limited strategies to address these incidents (9, 11).

Despite widespread homoprejudice in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (12, 13), the majority of studies on homoprejudiced violence have focused on high-income countries with limited data from LMICs, including China (4). The authors found only one 2015 Chinese study of 751 people reporting that 40.7% of sexual minorities experienced name calling, 34.8% were verbally abused, 22.4% were isolated in school, and 6.0% received physical violence threats (6).

Second, existing evidence is focused on sexual minorities more broadly (9). Previous research on LGBT youth in the United States reported that gay men are at higher risk of social unacceptance and homoprejudiced remarks compared to lesbian and bisexual subgroups (14, 15). However, little is known about their experiences of homoprejudiced violence among gay men or men who have sex with men (MSM) most of who are gay men. Discrimination and homoprejudiced violence are known impeding factors.
to gay men’s sexual orientation disclosure (7, 10, 16) and can consequently limit men’s utilization of local HIV and other sexual health services (17). A study with MSM in the United States reported that homoprejudiced violence victimization during childhood and adolescence was associated with more condomless sex or sex with partners of unknown HIV status as well as higher risk of HIV acquisition during adulthood (18). Homoprejudiced violence perpetrated by gay men themselves also remains underexplored. It is reported that gay men might also attempt violence against other sexual minority people(9). Gender nonconformity, a gender expression that is perceived to be inconsistent with gender norms expected for an individual, is stigmatized, especially among males.(14) Masculinity is a socially desirable gender expression for men, and according to Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, aggression is a feature of masculinity (19, 20). Because of this stereotype, in order to distinguish themselves from gay men, both heterosexual men and closeted gay men may act in an aggressive way towards gay people to manifest their masculinity and keep a social distance from gay men. While some gay men are afraid of being the subject of homoprejudiced violence and in order to hide their actual sexual orientation, they might attempt aggressive behaviors against LGBT groups to reinforce their masculinity in front of others (6, 9). Therefore, homoprejudiced violence can be perpetrated by gay men themselves and understanding the phenomenon within these communities may help shed light upon the underlying causes of violence. Thus, to inform the content and scale of violence interventions needed, this study aims to examine the frequency and correlates of homoprejudiced violence among MSM in Guangzhou China.

Material And Methods

**Online survey**

With assistance from a local community-based organization (CBO) and the Guangzhou Center for Diseases Control and Prevention (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 sex with men including oral or anal sex, and 4) 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, heterosexual 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), 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 questionnaire**

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 questionnaire mainly to assess the magnitude of the problem rather than for scale validation. The 12-item homoprejudiced violence questionnaire asked whether a participant had ever experienced any of the following due to their sexual orientation: being gossiped about, 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 questionnaire 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”. A new summative variable was generated by adding up the responses (yes coded as 1, no or do not want to tell were coded as 0) of the 12 items to assess the overall prevalence. The summed value 0 was recoded as 0 (no prior experiences of homoprejudiced violence), and the summed values 1 to 12 were recoded as 1 (prior experiences of homoprejudiced violence of any type) (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.

Results

We invited 2691 participants and 917 completed the questionnaire (response rate = 34%).
Overall, 140 did not meet inclusion criteria and were excluded from the analysis. A total of 777 responses were included in the analysis. Table 1 shows sociodemographic characteristics of the whole sample as well as by their experiences of homoprejudiced violence. Over half of survey respondents were under the age of 30 (495, 64.9%), and self-identified as gay (447, 57.5%). Most resided in urban areas (639, 82.2%). A large proportion were non-students (718, 92.4%), and about half had obtained university-level education or above (440, 56.7%). Around 40% (313) of the respondents earned an annual income between US$8682-13024, and nearly three-quarters had never been engaged or married to a woman (574, 73.9%). Most respondents had disclosed their sexual orientation to people other than their partners (571, 73.5%). A total of 399 (51.4%) men reported experiences of homoprejudiced violence, while 205 (25.9%) men self-reported to be a perpetrator of homoprejudiced violence (Figure 1). Frequencies of each violence item are reported in Table 2. One hundred and six men (13.4%) experienced physical violence, 183 (23.1%) name calling, 200 (25.2%) social isolation, 113 (14.2%) deprivation of economic resources or personal belongings, and 128 (16.1%) cyber violence on social media.

Table 1: Sample characteristics of MSM who have experienced/engaged in homoprejudiced violence in Guangzhou, China

| Total       | N=777 (%) |
|-------------|-----------|
| Age (years) |           |
| <30         | 495 (64.9)|
| 30-39       | 268 (35.1)|
| Residence permit † |         |
| Rural       | 138 (17.8)|
| Urban       | 639 (82.2)|
| Occupation  |           |
| Non-student | 718 (92.4)|
| Student     | 59 (7.6)  |
| Marital status with a woman |         |
| Never married | 574 (73.9)|
| Description                        | N     | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------------|
| Engaged or married                | 139   | 17.9       |
| Separated, divorced or widowed    | 64    | 8.2        |
| Highest education level           |       |            |
| High school or below              | 82    | 10.6       |
| Some college                      | 255   | 32.8       |
| University or above               | 440   | 56.7       |
| Annual income (USD)               |       |            |
| <8682                             | 231   | 29.7       |
| 8682-13024                        | 313   | 40.3       |
| >13024                            | 233   | 29.9       |
| Gender                            |       |            |
| Male                              | 675   | 86.9       |
| Female                            | 46    | 5.9        |
| Transgender/unsure                | 39    | 5.0        |
| Sexual orientation                |       |            |
| Gay                               | 447   | 57.5       |
| Bisexual                          | 175   | 22.5       |
| Heterosexual                      | 116   | 14.9       |
| Unsure/other                      | 39    | 5.0        |
| Sexual orientation disclosure ‡   |       |            |
| Yes                               | 571   | 73.5       |
| No                                | 378   | 48.6       |
| Ever experienced homoprejudiced   |       |            |
| violence                          |       |            |
| Yes                               | 399   | 51.4       |

%: valid percentages used

† Based on Hukou, the Chinese household registration system

‡ Sexual orientation disclosure to others besides sexual partners

Table 2: Frequency of individual homoprejudiced 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)

After controlling for demographic variables including age, residence permit, occupation,
marital status, education level, and annual income, multivariable logistic regression analyses showed that compared to respondents who self-identified as gay men, 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 (Table 3). Respondents who had disclosed their sexual orientation status with others were 1.8 times (AOR=1.8, 95% CI: 1.3-2.5) more likely to have experienced homoprejudiced violence than those who had not (Table 3).

Compared to those above the age of 30, respondents who were under the age of 30 were 2.4 times more likely to have committed homoprejudiced violence against others (AOR = 2.4, 95% CI: 1.5-3.8) (Table 3). Respondents residing in urban areas were 2.9 times more likely to have perpetrated homoprejudiced violence against others compared to respondents from rural areas (AOR = 2.9, 95% CI: 1.6-5.2). Respondents who were engaged or married to women were 5.7 times (AOR = 5.7, 95% CI: 3.6-9.1) more likely to have perpetrated homoprejudiced violence than those who had never been married, and respondents who had been separated, divorced, or widowed were 9.2 times (AOR = 9.2, 95% CI: 4.8-17.6) more likely to have done so. Compared to those who self-identified as male, respondents who considered themselves as female or transgender/unsure were found to be 3.0 times (AOR = 3.0, 95% CI: 1.5-6.2) and 2.2 times (AOR = 2.2, 95% CI: 1.2-4.2) more likely to have been a perpetrator, respectively. Respondents who ever experienced homoprejudiced violence before were 2.4 times (AOR = 2.4, 95% CI: 1.6-3.5) more likely to have initiated homoprejudiced violence against others.

Table 3: Factors associated with experiencing homoprejudiced violence/ever violating others among MSM in Guangzhou,
**Demographic factors (AORs: including demographic variables only in the modeling)**

| Demographic factor                      | COR        | AOR        |
|-----------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Age (years)                             |            |            |
| <30                                     | 0.8 (0.6-1.1) | 0.9 (0.6-1) |
| >=30                                    | 1          | 1          |
| Residence permit †                      |            |            |
| Rural                                   | 1          | 1          |
| Urban                                   | 1.6 (1.1-2.3)* | 1.5 (0.99-2) |
| Occupation                              |            |            |
| Non-student                             | 1          | 1          |
| Student                                 | 1.0 (0.6-1.7) | 1.2 (0.7-2) |
| Marital status                          |            |            |
| Never married                           | 1          | 1          |
| Engaged or married                      | 1.5 (1.0-2.2)* | 1.5 (0.99-2) |
| Separated, divorced or widowed          | 1.5 (0.9-2.6) | 1.7 (0.9-2) |
| Highest education level                 |            |            |
| High school or below                    | 0.6 (0.4-0.9)* | 0.6 (0.4-1) |
| Some college                            | 0.6 (0.4-0.8)*** | 0.6 (0.4-0) |
| University or above                     | 1          | 1          |
| Annual income (USD)                     |            |            |
| <8682                                   | 0.7 (0.5-1.1) | 1.0 (0.6-1) |
| 8682-13024                              | 1.1 (0.8-1.6) | 1.3 (0.9-1) |
| >13024                                  | 1          | 1          |

**AORs: controlling for age, residence permit, occupation, marital status, education level, and monthly income**

| Identity                          | COR        | AOR        |
|-----------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Gender identity                   |            |            |
| Male                              | 1          | 1          |
| Female                            | 1.0 (0.5-1.8) | 0.9 (0.5-1) |
| Transgender/unsure                | 1.9(1.1-3.4)* | 1.6 (0.9-3) |
| Sexual orientation                |            |            |
| Gay                               | 1          | 1          |
| Bisexual                          | 1.6 (1.1-2.2)* | 1.2 (0.8-1) |
| Heterosexual                      | 0.6 (0.4-0.9)* | 0.6 (0.4-0) |
| Unsure/other                      | 2.6 (1.3-5.3)* | 2.6 (1.2-5) |
| Sexual orientation disclosure ‡   |            |            |
| No                                | 1          | 1          |
| Yes                               | 1.9 (1.4-2.6)*** | 1.8 (1.3-2) |

**Ever experienced homophob precipitation violence**

| Yes                                | 1          | 1          |
Discussion

Homoprejudiced violence is an important yet underexplored public health issue among sexual minorities in many LMICs. Our study contributes to the literature by examining homoprejudiced violence among MSM in China, including the exploration of MSM-initiated homoprejudiced violence in China.

We found that approximately half of men had ever experienced some form of homoprejudiced violence. This is lower than the prevalence of homoprejudiced violence observed in the UK (9) and US (11, 23). Lower prevalence of homoprejudiced violence may be related to lower levels 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 the 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 high levels of 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 experience of 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.

The data presented here have direct 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 suggests that among MSM, 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 LGBT community, there may be missed opportunities for engaging peer-led community-based organizations and other young gay men to develop anti-violence interventions.

The results and conclusions of this study should be viewed in the context of several 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 of MSM in China. Second, we combined
participants’ response of “no” and “don’t want to tell” to homoprejudiced violence as one
category. This may result in a conservative or underestimate of the actual prevalence of
homoprejudiced violence experiences due to unwillingness to share. Third, the study
focused on homoprejudiced violence, but not broader experiences of homoprejudice. It is
likely that non-violent experiences of homoprejudice among MSM are even more prevalent
(e.g. social exclusion). Fourth, we recruited MSM who ever had anal or oral sex with a man
in the study but did not include those who were gay men but had never engaged in sex
with a man, limiting our understanding of the experiences of homoprejudiced violence to a
subset of sexually active MSM. 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 explored this
by examining MSM’s homoprejudiced violence experiences. We found high prevalence 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. Urgent actions must be taken to create
environments where MSM feel safe and protected from violence.
List Of Abbreviations

MSM = men who have sex with men
LMIC = low- and middle-income countries

Declarations

**Ethical approval and consent to participate**

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

**Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

**Availability of data and materials**

The datasets used and/or analyzed 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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Homophrophobic violence in Guangzhou, China

We examined violent behavior and experience among Chinese men who have sex with men (MSM).

Here’s what we found:

Out of 777 MSM surveyed,

- **51.4%** had experienced homophophobic violence
- **25.9%** had been perpetrators of homophophobic violence

VIOLENCE AMONG MSM

MSM who had experienced homophophobic violence were **2.4 times** more likely to act violently towards others compared to those who had not experienced homophophobic violence before.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION DISCLOSURE

MSM who were out to people besides their partners were **5.7 times** more likely to have acted violently towards other MSM compared to those still in the closet.
Figure 1

Infographic of homoprejudiced violence in Guangzhou, China. Source of data: The authors created this infographic based on the study findings.