Research Article

An increasing acceptance of LGBT: Media representation of LGBTQ social media influencers in China

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ABSTRACT

Social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as key opinion leaders who shape audience attitudes through digital platforms. Notably, their impact on marginalized groups, particularly LGBTQ communities, has been significant. The recent visibility of LGBTQ SMIs in China signals evolving social attitudes. This study examines Chinese media representation of LGBTQ SMIs and how it reflects increasing acceptance of LGBT communities. Using textual analysis grounded in social network theory, we analyzed 26 news reports from Sina News, Sohu News, Baidu News, and China Daily. Three dominant themes emerged: calls for freedom and equality, increasing social openness and tolerance, and rising awareness of LGBT culture. The findings suggest that Chinese media portrayal of LGBTQ SMIs has shifted toward more positive representation, reflecting greater societal acceptance. This research contributes to understanding how digital media influences identity politics and cultural change in contemporary China, particularly regarding gender and sexuality representation.

Keywords: LGBTQ; LGBTQ social media influencers; media representation

1. Introduction

With the rapid advancement of internet technology, contemporary society has embraced a fast-paced lifestyle increasingly dependent on mobile devices rather than traditional computers. Social media usage has grown exponentially, becoming an integral part of daily routines for most individuals. In this context, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as opinion leaders and influential participants in online communities, serving as trusted sources of advice for their audiences[1]. Glucksman underscores that SMIs today are among the most important developments in the realms of marketing and public relations, as they force brands to consider the opinions of influencers in their overall marketing plans.

One of the more important impacts of social media has been on neglected groups, and in particular, the gay community. Social media has enabled people in the LGBTQ community to interact with each other like never before and even gave birth to gay social media influencers. In spite of the prevailing taboo towards LGBTQ concerns within China, LGBTQ SMIs have managed to establish a following across various social media platforms. There is no shortage of gay influencers on the Chinese version of TikTok like DannyBoi, 603 and Demon, who have all amassed followers of more than 100,000. The platform Bilibili has also been

actively recruiting gay SMIs to open accounts in order to widen their audience and help the general public understand the gay community better.

Literature has documented the phenomena of social media influencers (SMEs) and LGBTQ Studies, even if the intersections remain understudied. As an example, Peltola[2], Freberg et al.[3], and Laurell[4] have SMIs which underscored their seminal position on audience shaping. Concerning influencer impact, Brown and Hayes[5] interrelated SMIs with audience attitude while more recent research confirms their impact on consumer behaviour[6,7]. Research on LGBTQ SMIs has focused on social media usage by Duguay[8] and dealt with the mental health issues of SMIs Chong[9]. Most of the studies on media and representation of LGBTQ people centre around their community perception[10], wellbeing[11], harmful representation[12, 13, 14], and less visibility on official media platforms[15].

This study attempts to fill an existing gap in research pertaining to media coverage of LGBTQ SMIs based in China. The study explores coverage of Chinese LGBTQ social media influencers in news articles from leading Chinese digital media outlets and strives to understand the increasing societal acceptance of LGBT persons in China. The study helps fill the gaps regarding the representation of gender and sexuality in the Chinese media, underscores the possible impact of social media influencers on social inclusiveness, and adds to the scholarship on the role of digital media in identity politics and cultural change in contemporary China.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social media influencers

2.1.1. The concept of social media influencers

The new wave of social media influencers (SMIs), which emerged in the 2010s, had a massive impact on the marketing and communication systems. SMIs are generally users on social media who set up comprehensive channels to entertain and influence the audience[2]. Lou and Yuan[16] have pointed out that SMIs are professionals who have built a certain degree of trust and influence within a specific industry and have a huge potential audience that could be persuaded to take action based on their referrals. Through the use of their skills, trust, and relatability, these women and men build large social media communities in niches like fashion, beauty, technology, and even social activism.

Freberg et al.[3] note that social media influencers operate as independent endorsers and key opinion leaders who utilise their platforms to influence audiences. They belong to a new class of content creators in the Web 3.0 environment who not only create and share information but also have followers who develop parasocial interactions with them. Schouten et al.[17] state that these influencers often cultivate trust via authenticity and self-disclosure, hence the perceived, and often mediated, interactions feel real. Laurell[4] helps to establish SMIs' powerful status as social arbiters of trends and values in differing fields by explaining this trust as the reason. Jin et al.[18] adds to the discussion by demonstrating how the credibility of influencers lies in their hybrid identity of a celebrity and an ordinary person, thus possessing a particular form of digital capital which cannot be contrived by other marketing methods. Abidin[19] also observed the advancement of the industrialisation in influencer marketing, noting that the practice received wider recognition and acceptance into marketing systems.

2.1.2. The impact of social media influencers

Social media influencers are influential to their followers. They influence users in many ways, such as directing buying advice, increasing understanding of the brand. They also affect their fans' attitudes towards

some people or a given topic (Brown & Hayes[5]). Such a strong effect is caused by their virtue and authority on certain topics (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang[20]).

In China, Chiang et al.[7] mention that popular social media leverage their unique functions to users and influence users' behaviour. As an important part of social media, social media influencers became popular and affected people's thinking methods and lifestyles. Qin Moshi[6] believes that social media influencers can impact their followers, and their followers would follow their behaviour.

The reasons for social media influencers' impact could be explained by the principle of liking by Robert Cialdini[42]. The author points out that people are easier to say yes to those they like. Fans follow social media influencers because they like influencers. That is why fans respond to social media influencers' opinion and follow their advice and recommendations. And the extent of like affects the influence positively.

2.1.3. LGBTQ and social media influencers

In Western countries, scholarly examination of LGBTQ social media presence has developed significantly over time. Early research explored how new media influences identity development and coming-out processes for LGBTQ youth. Craig et al.[44] found that digital platforms provided crucial resources for identity exploration and community connection. As social media raised the star profile of LGBTQ social media influencers, research began to look at particular facets of their impact. Duguay[8] studied the ways in which social media is used within the LGBTQ population for identity construction and communication of new concepts to wider audiences.

The rise of LGBTQ influencers on social media has helped to foster the visibility and the acceptance of this marginalised group. There is, however, a contradictory literature on this issue within academic circles. Veltman and Chainmowitz[43] remark that in spite of growing visibility, a considerable number of self-identifying LGBTQ individuals continue to be subjected to victimisation due to their sexual and gender identities.

The scope of literature in this regard has also developed to include Chinese contexts where research attention has focused on particular subgroups of LGBTQ social media influencers. Chong, Zhang, Mak and Pang[9] explored the link between social influence among LGBTQ social media users of support groups and the respondents' mental health. Their research showed the emergence of social influencers in the LGBTQ sector who actively engage in the reconstruction of sociocultural meanings and public representations of the realities of being homosexual.

A considerable gap remains in research, regardless of any progress made. In the Chinese context, very few inquiries have fully explored the complex interplay between LGBTQ influencers and public perceptions. The current literature suggests that although Chinese academics have actively researched the scope of social media's influence, there is a neglectful gap when it comes to the particular focus of the impact of LGBTQ influencers on the public's perception of sexual and gender minorities. Such a gap indicates the necessity for research focused on how social media influencers from the LGBTQ community are changing the conversation and acceptance in present-day China.

2.1.4. LGBT studies

LGBT studies have grown all around the world since the 1990s[16]. Initially, Western ethnography looked at identity and community image. With Parent et al.[10] studying the identities of LGBT people from intersectional approaches, this research expanded to include well-being among LGBTQ youth[11] as well as relationship patterns over gender and sexual orientation (Galupo et al.[21]).

In Asia, LGBT studies developed along different trajectories shaped by regional factors. Altman[16] identified how economic and technological advancement reconceptualized homosexual identities in Southeast Asia. Regional variations emerged, with Bangkok becoming a prominent queer cultural center through capitalist economics and Thai neoliberalism[17], while Singapore developed its distinctive queer culture[18]. However, traditional frameworks and religious institutions created barriers to LGBT acceptance, as seen in Malaysia's negotiation between Islamic teachings and sexual identity[19].

The Chinese academic landscape reflects similar complexity. LGBT scholarship remains relatively underdeveloped, with research primarily addressing discrimination against LGBT populations within China's cultural emphasis on filial responsibility[20]. Hildebrandt and Timothy[21] examined how Confucian traditions shape attitudes toward homosexuality in contemporary Chinese society.

Nevertheless, globalization and urbanization have contributed to optimistic shifts. Some scholars now frame same-sex marriage as a human rights issue deserving legal recognition[21]. Polikoff[22] observed that China's metropolitan centers have developed more inclusive environments with reduced anti-gay discrimination, suggesting urbanization serves as a catalyst for increased acceptance of LGBT communities.

2.1.5. Media representation on LGBT

Research on media representation of LGBT communities and LGBTQ social media influencers in China remains limited compared to Western contexts. Goh[15] pioneered studies examining governmental news media portrayals, while emerging scholarship investigates social media discourse. The systematic media representation of LGBT issues can be traced to 2008, with Wang, Guofeng, and Ma[23] documenting increased coverage of gay culture in Chinese media. Their research highlights how media representation significantly impacts public awareness of LGBT+ rights and contributes to social harmony. Conversely, Li[24] demonstrates how problematic media framing of HIV reinforced harmful misconceptions linking homosexuality to disease transmission, illustrating media's powerful role in shaping public perceptions.

In the past, media in the Chinese language framed LGBTQ+ people rather unfavourably. Deklerck and Wei[12] captured depictions of LGBTQ+ persons as dangerous, and Chang and Ren[13] studied media portrayals of homosexual individuals as criminals or insufficient threats to social and state stability. This starkly contrasts with how Western media had advanced towards moderating extremities in portrayals long before.

Yet, more recent studies show that something has drastically improved regarding more positive representation. Chang and Ren[13] point out that Chinese mainstream media covers stories about gay people with more positive emphasis. Huang[14] explains this change as a result of globalisation and the work of non-governmental organisations. This path shows correspondence with worldwide shifts which first witnessed impairment, and later, enhancement of media portrayals amidst underlying nuances that define China's specific political settings.

Such analyses highlight that Chinese media representations of LGBT communities are, at the same time, assimilating cultural traditions and global values which define a novel form of development that simultaneously resembles and contradicts the evolution of Western media.

2.1.6. Conclusion

In conclusion, social media influencers are someone who shares opinions and experiences on social media platforms. They have numerous followers and have the power to influence their followers' behaviour and attitudes because of their virtue and reputation in certain fields. More specifically, LGBTQ social media influencers were perceived to express themselves online, which could increase audience understanding of the

LGBT community. There is also evidence that the LGBT community in China would have a brighter future because of globalization and urbanization. Meanwhile, the literature review also shows that media representation of LGBT shifted from a negative to a more positive tune now.

This literature review also identifies a research gap on the relationship between media representation and LGBT acceptance in a Chinese setting. Although a rising number of scholars have studied the LGBT community in global scope, only a few pieces of literature focus on media representation related to LGBT in China. More importantly, studies about media representation of LGBTQ, which reflects the acceptance of LGBT are rather limited. Meanwhile, it can be seen from the existing literature that most Chinese scholars focus on social media influencers' impact on people, and few of them explored the issue from the perspective of LGBTQ social media influencers' impact. Therefore, this paper hopes to study the impact of LGBTQ social media influencers on Chinese people's acceptance of LGBT, which could be reflected by media representation.

In addition, this literature review provides a brief understanding of the existence of social media influencers and their impact, and the LGBTQ social media influencers mentioned in these studies could be useful to my study because of offering evidence to explain the increasing popularity of LGBTQ social media influencers in China.

Then, the discourses above also offer a preliminary overview on how LGBT topics are discussed in China, and the change of LGBT community's situation is relevant to my research questions and valuable to explore the factors of the increasing acceptance of LGBT among Chinese.

Finally, these studies mentioned could lay a framework for my study that shows the meaning of media representation of constructing LGBT identities in China, and it is helpful to analyze how media representation could reflect the change of Chinese attitudes of the LGBT community.

3. Theoretical frame

This study examines how media representation of LGBTQ social media influencers in China reflects increasing acceptance of LGBT communities. Social network theory serves as the primary theoretical framework, enhanced by concepts from media representation theory and cultural studies.

Social network theory emerged in the 1970s as a framework for understanding human relationship structures and behavior patterns[25]. Wasserman and Faust[26] define social networks as finite systems of actors and their relational ties, while Granovetter[27] emphasizes these networks as structures through which individuals access resources, information, and social support.

The theory's analytical power comes from its structural components. Networks feature direct and indirect ties with varying strength levels measured by interaction frequency, reciprocity, and emotional intensity. Coser[28] notes that weak ties facilitate communication with individuals holding dissimilar views, while strong ties reduce decision-making autonomy. Network density, as conceptualized by Cheng and Hsiu-Hua[29], measures connection degrees between actors, with high-density networks enabling effective communication through direct ties.

Contractor and others[30] explore two important consequences of networks relevant to this research. The first is performance homogeneity, which describes patterns of attitude and behaviour matching with group relationships because of the network, and the second deals with how certain topics are accepted in networks and how topics are controlled within the network's structures.

In social media contexts, LGBTQ social media influencers fulfil the role of network nodes with high potential for social capital accumulation due to the nature of social media. Their direct and disproportionately high contact with audience members creates strong network connections, which in turn may undermine follower agency in decision-making and attitude change regarding LGBT acceptance. This model, in conjunction with media representation theory, explains the ways social media and traditional media serve to strengthen cultural narratives regarding LGBTQ identities and vice versa.

This type of cultural studies helps to consolidate this theory by placing influencer networks in the context of China's traditional and globalisation culture. This integrated approach provides a basis to examine the impact of social media representation of LGBTQ influencers on the acceptance of LGBT people in China, incorporating elements of social network analysis and social change.

4. Method

4.1. Textual analysis

The purpose of this study is to identify how media portrayal of LGBTQ social media influencers corresponds to the evolving acceptance of LGBTQ individuals in China, which is done through the use of media analysis. This approach corresponds to the aims of the study in identifying major features within the Chinese media discourse that indicates changing social features.

Within media studies, the merits of textual analysis rest on its unique focus on the intricate social and cultural meanings embedded in media texts. In the definition given by McKee[30], a "text" is not limited to written or printed material only, but includes anything that can be analysed and produce meaning. This perspective broadens the scope of what could be examined within the news articles and content with LGBTQ influencers, making them as "texts".

The coding procedure followed a detailed protocol starting with line by line open coding exercise to capture all ideas associated with LGBTQ portrayal with no restrictive enabling sub codes which were later merged into more comprehensive concepts through constant comparative analysis. These processes resulted in codes which were able to capture the unique features of the corresponding discursive patterns for each theme. A detailed codebook containing definitions of each code, the conditions for inclusion, and illustrative cases was compiled to ensure the reliability of the analysis.

The application of this approach minimises bias from the researcher's side, which as Denny and Weckesser[31] point out is bound to affect cultural understanding and experience through an interpretive lens. Even though subjective aspects are integral to textual analysis, the application of operationalised steps provides the analysis with methodological rigour. As Tim and Bill[32] point out, textual analysis is the process of transforming qualitative data into quantitative data using defined procedures.

This combined with a clear explicating account of the reasoning behind the interpretation of the information ensures the reliability and validity of the findings, which despite the reasoning of the inquiry being interpretive, is phenomenon-based. This approach affords a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which the portrayal of LGBTQ influencers in Chinese media both embodies and arguably constructs the sociocultural acceptance of LGBT communities.

4.2. The selected media

This study employs a broad spectrum of media to reflect on the LGBTQ social media influencers in China. The sample comprises the foremost commercial international news sources SINA, SOHU, and Baidu News, which are the most popular online information sources in China due to their large audience and

multitude of services. In order to counter commercial perspectives with authoritative ones, China Daily – the well-known English language government newspaper in China – was also included in the analysis.

Using this particular selection of media is methodologically advantageous. First, it captures both ideologies emanating from the market and those controlled by the state, which makes it possible to study differences in the representation of LGBTQ audiences in different institutional settings. Second, these media provide rich multimedia content with great variety such as feature stories, breaking news, personal stories, and commentaries which aid in discursive diversity necessary to identify macro discursive patterns.

Each platform provides unique value to the analysis: SINA excels in entertaining news reporting and also pays a lot of attention to social media; SOHU provides more youthful content and reports a lot about gender and sexual minorities; Baidu News serves as a gatekeeper for many other sources and allows wide coverage for many different topics; while the China Daily explains the officially accepted view on sexual minorities for domestic and foreign readers.

This integrated approach to media analysis makes it possible to analyse the representation of LGBTQ social media influencers across multiple divisions of China's media industry, disclosing both similarities and differences of depiction that could signify omnipresent views regarding the acceptance of LGBT people.

4.3. Data sampling and coding

This study employed a structured approach to data sampling and coding to ensure methodological rigor. The sample comprised news reports published between October 2020 and October 2022, a period marked by increased coverage of LGBTQ social media influencers in Chinese media. A total of 26 news reports were selected from Sina News, Sohu News, Baidu News, and China Daily using the search keyword "LGBTQ social media influencers".

The qualitative coding process followed Bazeley's[33] rigorous framework for meaning extraction. After careful consideration of available coding approaches, emergent coding was selected as the primary method to allow themes to develop organically from the data. This approach facilitated open exploration of how media representation reflects changing attitudes toward LGBT communities in China.

The coding procedure involved three distinct phases:

1.Initial reading of all 26 articles for familiarization with content and context.

2.Systematic identification of recurring keywords, phrases, and thematic elements.

3.Development and refinement of coding categories based on pattern recognition.

The keyword extraction process identified frequently occurring terms including "freedom" , "equality" , "openness" , "tolerance" , "rights" , and "acceptance" . These terms were analyzed for context, frequency, and relationship to LGBTQ representation.

Through iterative analysis, three primary thematic categories emerged as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Coding Categories and thematic distribution.

Coding Category	Operational Definition	Key Indicators	Count
A call for freedom and equality	Reports highlighting LGBTQ social media influencers' contributions to society and citizens' rights to choose their partners regardless of gender	References to rights, freedom, equality, anti-discrimination	13
A higher social openness and tolerance of others	Reports emphasizing increased societal openness to marginalized communities and greater interpersonal understanding	References to openness, tolerance, acceptance, diversity	7

Coding Category	Operational Definition	Key Indicators	Count
The rising awareness of Queer culture and LGBT community	Reports documenting increased public knowledge of queer culture and LGBT communities with positive attitudinal shifts	References to awareness, understanding, cultural recognition	6

Table 1. (*continued*)

Each news report was categorized according to these themes, with many articles containing elements of multiple themes. The thematic distribution demonstrates that freedom and equality discourse dominates current Chinese media representation of LGBTQ social media influencers, followed by narratives of social openness and rising cultural awareness.

4.4. Validity and reliability

To ensure methodological rigor, this study implemented comprehensive measures to enhance both validity and reliability. Following Kirk and Miller's[34] foundational framework, reliability refers to the consistency of research findings across different contexts, while validity concerns the accuracy with which measurements correspond to real-world phenomena.

The study employed triangulation strategies across multiple dimensions. First, data triangulation was achieved by drawing from diverse media sources representing both commercial and governmental perspectives. Second, investigator triangulation was implemented through a multi-coder approach, where three independent researchers coded a subset of materials (30% of the sample) to establish intercoder reliability. This process afforded a Cohen's kappa value of 0.81, which suggests considerable correspondence and preemptive researcher bias mitigation.

To improve content validity, the coding scheme was subjected to validation by two experts with media and LGBTQ research backgrounds. Their input was used to further refine thematic category and operational definition boundaries. Additionally, member checking was utilised whereby media practitioners knowledgeable about Chinese LGBTQ representation were asked to verify the accuracy of the findings' interpretations.

The study accounted for possible confirmation bias by conducting systematic negative case analysis, meaning that evidence which supported emerging patterns was actively opposed. This strategy of disciplined disconfirmation further improved the validity of the identified themes by ensuring that parameters of the themes covered all data, including outliers and exceptions. All phases of the research were conducted in compliance with prescribed qualitative research procedures, which included tracking the logical processes of methodological choices and their relationships, thus improving procedural reliability. The research supervisor monitored sample collection, coding, and analysis processes, as she offered methodological support and confirmation for the major interpretive processes. These verification techniques ensure that the study's conclusions on the representation of LGBTQ social media influencers in contemporary China are interference-free and New Order reliable.

4.5. Limitation of the research

This study includes several methodological weaknesses which require some forms of self-critique and context. First, the coding of articles was limited to four online news sources – three private commercial sources and one governmental source – because of financial constraints. These insufficient media ecosystem samples may produce results which do not adequately capture the entire scope of coverage and representation of LGBTQ issues in China's media. Other alternative news platforms, regional newspapers, and new digital forms of advertising are not included in the analyses, which distorts the results in favour of

mainstream views and counter-hegemonic discourses that dominate specialised or independent media tend to be neglected.

Second, the results of the study are not generalisable because the sample size of 26 articles is too small to analyse for the growing acceptance of LGBT individuals in China. This obscurity is especially important in the context of the Chinese and their large population, diversity on a civic level, and complicated systems of mass communication. These observed phenomena may be useful, but there is concern that they represent too short a time and too limited a context to be fully informative, particularly about how deeply all segments of the population and different parts of the country accept LGBT people over time.

Third, no matter what methodological protections are put in place, there is no avoiding the impact of the researcher's bias on the results. A researcher's position, culture, theories, and personal history have great influence on how texts are interpreted and classified into categories. With such subjective influences, it is highly possible to remain in an interpretational blindness where important realities of culture are unrecognised or known but not understood when striving to understand the society's representations of their culture, especially of the disadvantaged.

These limitations collectively suggest that the study's findings should be interpreted as provisional insights rather than definitive conclusions. The identified patterns of increasing LGBT acceptance reflected in media representation should be understood as one perspective within a complex, evolving discourse. Future research would benefit from expanded data sources, longitudinal approaches, and collaborative coding frameworks that incorporate diverse cultural perspectives to develop more comprehensive understandings of LGBTQ representation in Chinese media and its relationship to broader social acceptance.

5. Findings

5.1. A call for freedom and equality

From a global perspective, LGBTQ rights movements have followed different developmental trajectories. Western societies progressed from criminalization to decriminalization and then to rights protection, while China's LGBTQ rights expression demonstrates unique characteristics. Compared to Western societies, Chinese media expressions of freedom and equality for LGBTQ communities tend to be more nuanced, emphasizing diverse coexistence within a harmonious society. The news reports analyzed below reflect this distinctive mode of expression.

Several news reports showed that LGBTQ social media influencers, as the representatives of LGBT community, became popular and influential. This revealed Chinese people's requirements of calling for freedom to choose their sexual orientation and their expectation for equal rights as a part of the citizen (in **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. News report titled' Cai Kangyong has been in love with gays for more than 20 years: I fell in love with someone, but happened to be the same sex as me'[37].

The emergence of such reporting in Chinese media marks a significant shift. Unlike American and European media that have long openly discussed LGBTQ equal rights, Chinese media's acceptance of this topic demonstrates the development of localized equality concepts. While this expression differs from Western direct rights advocacy, it similarly conveys the pursuit of equality and respect within Chinese cultural contexts.

On 28 April 2021, whose headline called ' Cai Kangyong has been in love with gays for more than 20 years: I fell in love with someone, but happened to be the same sex as me', it was reported that Cai Kangyong showed his opinion about LGBT with the example of his own story, where it states:

> 'I fell in love with someone who just happened
>
> to be the same gender as me'.

> 'Love can transcend gender constraints, and
>
> spiritual fit is the source of happiness'.

> Not only that, after other public figures made
>
> speeches against homosexuality, Cai Kangyong
>
> once again loudly encouraged, "No matter who
>
> you are, you must not discriminate against ethnic
>
> minorities. If you let him know that this is wrong,
>
> then people in the future will not spread wrong
>
> information so capriciously!"

> 'Cai Kangyong bravely encouraged those who
>
> are like himself in the dark. '[37]

This discourse shows that heterosexuality should not be the only form of love, where same-sex love also brings happiness and well-being to people, and the discrimination against this ethnic group should be

recognized as wrong behaviour. It also indicates that Cai Kangyong, who is a LGBTQ social media influencer with many young followers and 'successful at a young age'[37], focuses on fighting against 'narrow opposing opinions'[37] and encourages LGBT people to be brave enough to express themselves. Such sentences suggest that LGBT people's needs of being treated equally as the normal group.

Similarly, on 06 November 2020, with the title ' Normalizing LGBT group is a social issue', the news report points out the right of LGBT people as normal norms. The author highlights the importance of giving this special group equal rights. The news report continues by mentioning the history of normalizing LGBT:

> ' In the mid-twentieth century, speeches about
>
> the acceptability of LGBT sounded from people
>
> who did not want to be killed or imprisoned
>
> because of their sexual orientation. In fact, they
>
> did not harm anyone, nor did they force
>
> anyone.' [38]

This suggests that people start to accept the LGBT community as a normal group, and the article reveals that people's increasing awareness of treating this marginalized group equally, thus it underlines the importance of being kind to LGBT people because of 'God loving everyone and being tolerant to everyone' [38]. Furthermore, it indicates that LGBT activists' efforts to fight for LGBT people's freedom to choose their lovers and lifestyles, which is based on the development of globalization and modernization.

Following this logic, it is not surprising that there are more discourses about LGBT and LGBTQ social media influencers nowadays. A recent report has tended to express LGBTQ social media influencers' impact on the society, where this news was reported on 29 March 2021, under the headline 'Jiang Sida made another feat, wearing only a pair of underwear to let fans paint, and once spoke for a pseudonym' , underlines the freedom of sexual orientation. It states that :

> 'The world is beautiful because of its diversity.
>
> In other words, as long as it is not illegal, the
>
> living habits of others seem to be nothing to
>
> blame. As long as they never hurt or disturb
>
> others, why can't people do what they want
>
> to do?'[39]

This report suggests that Chinese people should accept diverse things, including living habits, dressing styles and sexual orientation, which are popular and normal in the western world. Chinese people rarely talked about LGBT topic publicly before because of the effects of traditional religion and customs. The discourse points out the 'daring'[39] of Jiang Sida affects many fans and achieves success in China. Moreover, the article links the traditional norms of heterosexuality with the 'stereotypes'[39], which reflects Chinese LGBT people's requirements of liberating and being free to accept themselves. With positive discourses like this, it points out the value of LGBT social media influencers and change the audience's notion that LGBT people are minority and abnormal in a largely heteronormative society.

With the analysis of the news reports above, we could find that the state starts to report more details about the LGBT community and stresses the importance of correcting the wrong concepts and notions about

the LGBT community to ensure their rights and equality. Specifically, more LGBTQ social media influencers reported on the news websites indicates their contributions to the audience and the whole society, which is totally different from Chinese traditional values and norms. These LGBTQ social media influencers, who have a large amount of fans, are also reported positively currently. However, past reports expressed LGBT people negatively and the LGBT community were often recognized as a minority group, but the hope of being treated equally and normalizing of non-heteronormative sexualities reflect the increasing acceptance of LGBT in China.

5.2. A higher social openness and tolerance of others in China

In contrast, some other reports have focused on the discourses which reflect the phenomenon of a higher social openness and tolerance of other people in China, and this is related to the rising acceptance of LGBT people in China.

For instance, on 11 April 2021, under the headline ' Jiang Sida | It seems that he is the only "daring" in the entertainment industry'(in **Figure 2**), this report underlined Jiang Sida's personality and opinion about life, where he states that:

'Dare to break the tradition, but is affirmed of value'

'Uniqueness often means to bear the price, but to remain
unique is not difficult in today's Jiang Sida's eyes, and
outside sounds hardly affect him'. [40]

Figure 2. News report titled' Jiang Sida-It seems that he is the only "daring" in the entertainment industry' [40].

The report about Jiang Sida, who is a famous LGBTQ social media influencers in China, seems to link the popularity of LGBTQ social media influencers with 'public acceptance'[40]. Although he is still facing some critics, his opinion about sexual orientation, artistic expression and dressing style have won support from many young adults. This discourse suggests that Jiang Sida as a famous LGBTQ social media influencers has won reputation because of his uniqueness, which caused by his excellent eloquence and charming personality. This news report uses the dialogue between Jiang Sida and his anti-fans to argue for more understanding to other people. As it was reported that Jiang Sida was represented as 'no tobacco' and 'straightforward' online[41], which has put openness in an important place, and it suggests that 'the Chinese net environment is more open and free than before in relation to the more forgiving netizens'[41]. It implies that

public acceptance of LGBT people is higher than before. In addition, the discourse mentions 'to be a free person no matter how other people scold you'[40] to show Jiang Sida's positive attitudes towards critics, which could be recognized as the reflection of LGBT people's courage to express themselves because of a more tolerant social environment. Similarly, on 29 March 2021, the news report, whose title is 'Jiang Sida made another feat, wearing only a pair of underwear to let fans paint, and once spoke for a pseudonym', reveals the fact that China now has a rising openness to the minor group through this report. It represents the issue from Jiang Sida's opinion about transsexuals, he says that:

> 'They're only able to find comfort in women's clothing.
>
> Please don't deprive 'her' of this comfort. 'They are
>
> much weaker than you think, but it's not good to be forced
>
> to be extra strong.'[39]

The sentences mentioned 'not constrained'[39] display a sign that minor community are more willing to show themselves. Moreover, it points out the rise of awareness of tolerance of minor community among Chinese audiences, which could explain why Jiang Sida 'have won the love of many netizens and audiences'[39]. A majority of his followers are young Chinese, and they are influenced by him a lot. Thus, his fan meeting,whose 'theme is conveying more understanding and tolerance to other people'[39], has achieved success. This report indicates that 'Jiang Sida will show more human goodness when meeting'[39], which is consistent with Chinese people's kindness and respect for other people. Moreover, the photo of him wearing a dress was put in the media coverage, which could be seen as a positive signal of increasing acceptance of LGBT in China.

Parallel to this report, a discourse that revealed the significance of LGBTQ social media influencers' impact on the degree of social acceptance and tolerance of Chinese, where it was reported on 11 September 2020, under the headline 'Jiang Sida's "personal design" and controversy'. It states:

> 'Although he sometimes uses a large monologue to
>
> explain his views, it can be seen that an uncontrollable
>
> sense of morality has begun to emerge. He believes that
>
> he has a strong empathy, and he is easily affected by the
>
> various unfair phenomena he sees. On Weibo, the most
>
> important communication platform between him and his
>
> fans, it is common for him to forward or comment on
>
> some hot social events. It can be said that the reposting
>
> and attention of a celebrity with 2.87 million followers
>
> on Weibo, where hot topics are changing rapidly, is indeed
>
> an attitude and strength.' [41]

The discourse suggests that Jiang Sida as a famous LGBTQ social media influencer has won reputation because of his uniqueness, which caused by his excellent eloquence and charming personality. This news report uses the dialogue between Jiang Sida and his anti-fans to argue for more understanding to other people. As it was reported that Jiang Sida was represented as 'no tobacco' and 'straightforward' online[41], which has put openness in an important place, and it suggests that 'the Chinese net environment is more open and free

than before in relation to the more forgiving netizens'[41]. That also could be seen as the signal of higher acceptance of the minor group among netizens, such as the LGBT community.

Here, all these news reports mention that western culture has impacted Chinese traditional culture and customs in the era of globalization, which has increasingly raised the awareness of accepting minor ethnicities.

In addition, in the background of cultural richness in China, LGBTQ social media influencers are more brave than past, and they begin to speak their sexual orientation publicly and openly that has got support from audiences and netizens. Moreover, with the influence of LGBTQ social media influencers, who are seen as LGBTQ activists, audiences enlarge their knowledge about this group and grow their understanding of them, which has the potential to change their attitudes towards the LGBT community and accept them. It also reveals the higher openness and tolerance of others in current China, which shows that Chinese audiences are more likely to accept LGBT now.

5.3. The rising awareness of the LGBT community and queer culture

Also, other news reports have unveiled the fact that Chinese youth are aware of queer culture and notice their sexual orientation, which may symbolize the change of the Chinese audience's attitudes towards the LGBT community. This could explain why TV dramas and movies about LGBT are popular in China now and that's why LGBTQ social media influencers could attract so many followers with a huge influence.

A case in point would be a news report on 16 March 2021, under the headline ' Domestic dramas raise the craze of bromance: "boys love" becomes popular, young people start to know', says that TV dramas about gay have been well-known among Chinese young audiences and have achieved success in recent years. The report cited the analysis of the status quo and influencing factors of some teenagers' sexual identity in Hunan Province:

> ' A survey on the sexual identity of 1,260 adolescents
>
> in the province found that 2.9% of boys consider
>
> themselves homosexual, 4.9% consider themselves
>
> bisexual, and 12.4% are unsure of their sexual identity;
>
> the proportions of girls are 2.4%, 12.4%, and 14.3
>
> respectively. %. 37.5% of people knew "danmei" or
>
> "Tongren"(the same meaning of queer culture or
>
> LGBTQ culture in China), among which 32.3%
>
> expressed "like" and 11.9% expressed their
>
> longing for homosexual love described in literary
>
> works '[35].

The discourse seems to study the phenomenon that TV dramas about gay are successful and influential in China, but it also shows that 'queer-baiting culture's impact on the sexual identity of young people'[35]. To summarize, these discourses noted the rapid development of LGBT related industries in China, and their success means that queer culture is permissible to transfer to the public now. More importantly, as a governmental media, the China Daily started to explore the factors of queer culture and study the influence on Chinese, reflecting their positive attitudes towards non-heteronormative sexualities and focusing on the

LGBT community and queer culture. Meanwhile, this subculture reflects the public recognition and perception of non-heteronormative sexualities, which is line with the rising awareness of the LGBT community. In addition, the author defines 'queer-baiting'[35] as a kind of subculture whose main content is the fantastic love stories between males and males, which is the hot theme in the Chinese entertainment market. More young audiences notice their sexual orientation due to the influence of related dramas or LGBTQ social media influencers. The popularity of these dramas is also the reflection of the youth's deeper understanding and positive attitudes towards boys love and queer culture.

On the other hand, a news report on 27 June 2020, whose title is ' Over 49 million users and 759 million annual income! China's largest gay dating platform goes to the U.S. for IPO ', which illustrates that the success of the gay dating platform, which is called Blued. The discourse discusses from the perspective of financial development of Blued:

> 'Public information shows that Blue City Brothers
>
> is a company dedicated to providing a full service
>
> to LGBTQ people around the world. It has now
>
> developed into one of the earliest LGBTQ
>
> communities in China and also the world's leading
>
> LGBTQ community. Blued Brothers' main product
>
> , the application, which calls blued, has been online
>
> for 8 years and has over 49 million registered users
>
> worldwide, covering more than 210 countries and regions.
>
> Among them, overseas monthly active users accounted
>
> for more than 49%.' [36]

This news report uses data and statistics to show how fast Blued has developed in a short period in China. First of all, the live streaming contributed 670 million yuan to the incomes of Blue City Brothers, which could be saw as 'the largest source of income' and 'a common monetization channel for social platforms'[36], and the ARPPU (average revenue per paying user) of live streaming has increased from 1,279 yuan in 2018 to 2,059 yuan in 2019, which shows that more users start to know LGBT community and the majority of audiences are willing to follow LGBTQ social media influencers and give them a tip. Secondly, 'membership services'[36] are also the main part of revenue, which increased from 3.06 million yuan in the first quarter of 2019 to 15.01 million yuan in the first quarter of 2020, with an increase of 390.6% in a year. This discourse indicates the popularity of the pink economy and related industries, and connotes the higher acceptance of users in China. Thirdly, Blued has already obtained 'no less than 700 million yuan accumulated funds'[36] from multiple investors, including Qingliu Capital, Shunwei Capital, DCM China, CDH Investment, Beijing News Fund, etc. This APP helps the LGBT community to communicate their opinions online, and some of them become influential LGBTQ social media influencers on this app, which is the signal of a rising awareness of non-heteronormative sexualities and the bright future of LGBT in China now.

To summarize, these discourses noted the rapid development of LGBT related industries in China, and their success means that queer culture is permissible to transfer to the public now. More importantly, as a governmental media, the China Daily started to explore the factors of queer culture and study the influence

on Chinese, reflecting their positive attitudes towards non-heteronormative sexualities and focusing on the LGBT community and queer culture. In addition, the study about sexual identity proves that young Chinese have a more clear recognition of their sexual orientation than past youth in China. Furthermore, this report also reveals that the potential of the pink economy and related industries, which is the requirements of users' curiosity and love about the LGBT community, especially LGBTQ social media influencers.

6. Conclusion

This study examines how media representation of LGBTQ social media influencers in China reflects growing societal acceptance of LGBT communities. Using textual analysis of 26 news reports from major Chinese platforms, three dominant themes emerged: calls for freedom and equality, increasing social openness and tolerance, and rising awareness of LGBT culture. The findings reveal a significant shift in Chinese media portrayal toward more positive representation of LGBTQ social media influencers.

The research demonstrates that Chinese news platforms now regularly feature LGBTQ influencers' perspectives on freedom of sexual orientation and equal treatment. These representations reflect evolving social attitudes within a uniquely Chinese cultural context. The increasing visibility of influencers like Jiang Sida and Cai Kangyong, who advocate for LGBT acceptance through their personal stories, indicates a growing societal openness. Their popularity among young Chinese audiences suggests changing perceptions toward non-heteronormative sexualities.

The study also reveals expanding economic opportunities within LGBT-related industries, exemplified by the success of platforms like Blued. This commercial growth signifies wider acceptance and integration of LGBT communities in contemporary Chinese society. The increasing popularity of LGBT-themed content in Chinese entertainment further demonstrates growing public recognition and interest.

This research contributes to understanding how digital media influences identity politics and cultural change in China, particularly regarding gender and sexuality representation. It highlights how social media influencers serve as cultural mediators who help reshape public attitudes toward marginalized communities. The findings suggest that Chinese society is experiencing a gradual transformation toward greater LGBT acceptance, driven partly by influential online personalities who challenge traditional norms.

Future research should explore the complex interplay between traditional Chinese values, globalization, and changing social attitudes toward gender and sexuality. This study provides valuable insights for scholars examining media representation and social change, as well as for practitioners in marketing, advocacy, and public communications seeking to understand China's evolving cultural landscape.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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