



International Communication Association

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Dear Hongcheng Lu,

Thank you for submitting your research to the 74th Annual ICA Conference. I am pleased to inform you that your submission **Exploring the awareness of attraction of the Fourth-love queer heterosexuality community in China: a constructivist grounded theory approach**, has been accepted for an in person presentation at the ICA Conference, *Communication and Global Human Rights*, to be held on 20-24 June 2024 in Gold Coast, Australia, located at the Gold Coast Convention and Exhibition Centre and the Star Hotel, (2684-2690 Gold Coast Hwy, Broadbeach QLD 4218, Australia and Broadbeach Island, Broadbeach 4218, QLD, Australia).

As you are no doubt aware, ICA is the premier global academic association for scholars interested in the study, teaching, and application of all aspects of communication. **We confirm with this letter that your attendance at this meeting, as one whose work in the communication field has been determined to satisfy our educational standards, is crucial to the success of this conference.** The exchange of knowledge, research, and collaboration our conference provides is not possible without the full participation of all accepted authors, and thus we urge you to make the necessary arrangements (visa applications, especially) as soon as possible to support your attendance.

STEP 1 (Now): Check our ICA24 Visa Guide (<https://www.icahdq.org/mpage/2024-VisaInformation>) to see what is required for your entry to Australia and **complete those steps as early as possible to determine your need for a visa, ETA, or other documentation.**

STEP 2 (mid January): Register for the conference on the ICA website.

STEP 3 (late February): Check the released schedule for the exact date(s)/time(s) of your presentation(s).

STEP 4 (first week of March): Register to attend (our hotel block usually sells out, so it's important to register in advance to receive early access to book your room). Attendees are responsible for paying for their accommodations; ICA does not cover the cost. However, there are numerous travel grant opportunities; see our travel grant page for more information.

STEP 5 (mid-March): Final program goes public; check it immediately to ensure all names and affiliations associated with your research are correct.

The conference program - along with a listing of all sessions, special events, and activities - will be available online closer to the conference. We anticipate five days of scholarship and camaraderie with over 4,000 attendees from over 80 countries, and we're so glad you'll be one of them. Please check your email inbox as well as the ICA website and ICA's social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter) periodically for updates. We look forward to seeing you either online or in Gold Coast (according to your selection during the submission process) and trust that you will have a fruitful and productive conference.

Sincerely,



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Dear Hongcheng,

Thank you for registering for 74th Annual ICA Conference

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Thank you for registering for the 74th Annual ICA Conference! We are delighted to have you join 20-24 June 2024, whether you are joining us in person or remotely!

Additional information for attendees may be found below. The detailed conference program—along with a listing of all research sessions, special events, and activities—will be available online closer to the conference.

Please check the [ICA conference website](#) and [Facebook](#) and/or [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#) accounts periodically for updates. Registered attendees will receive daily emails during the conference with highlights of each day.

HELPFUL LINKS

ICA 2024 FAQ: Visit ICA24's [Frequently Asked Questions](#) (FAQs)

Visa Invitation Letter Information: Visit ICA's [Visa Information page](#) to learn more.

Visa Invitation Request Form: Please [click here](#) fill out the visa request form.

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Hotels: Our ICA24 headquarters is the STAR Gold Coast, with multiple overflow blocks in other hotels

brands (Sofitel and several condo properties TBA) within a 10-minute walk. The hotel block will open in early March with priority for those who have preregistered prior to 12:00noon ICA Headquarters time on 31 January. Visit the [conference hotel page](#) to learn more.

Childcare: Visit the [ICA Kids 2024](#) page to learn more.

Carbon offset: Visit the [carbon offset program resource page](#) to learn more.

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Exploring the awareness of attraction of the Fourth-love queer heterosexuality community in China: a constructivist grounded theory approach

Background

Beyond China's heterosexual demographic, a subcultural community of self-proclaimed "the Fourth-love" (第四爱) is rapidly merging and raising awareness of concerns. By aggregating labelled communities as the Fourth-love of leading media platforms (i.e., Douban, Weibo) in China, a minimum of 448,000 Fourth-love practitioners were found active on social media. The term corresponds to First-love under the heteronormative framework; gay and lesbian relationships are referred to as Second and Third-love. Thus, the Fourth-love is regarded as an intimate relationship that subverts the heteronormative framework. According to the existing basis and their consensual definition of the community, a Fourth-love practitioner is assumed to refer to heterosexuals who practice gender role reversal in intimate relationships, especially in sexual behaviour; females take the dominant lead, steering and bossing the male around instead. The specific practice consists of performing penetrative acts on the male through the use of a strap-on dildo, known as "pegging" (Savage, 1999).

In essence, such subcultures can be viewed as the practice of de-gendered consciousness or socialization of shifted sexual society norms in the occasion of intimate relationships. Pegging is also regarded as a result of social construction

(Aguilar, 2017), which may reveal synchrony and nexus between the de-gendered consciousness and the convergence of the Fourth-love subculture in China.

To unveil and conceptualize the relations between de-gendered content in media and the Fourth-love community, this study employs a constructive grounded theory approach to clarify the mechanisms underlying its idiosyncrasy.

Literature Review

The de-gendered content in media

As gender diversity evolves, the principle of gender neutrality demonstrates limitations in its ability to encompass all forms of gender, sexual orientations and gender identity (Saguy et al., 2020). In an effort to eliminate gender roles and support inclusive citizenship, the notion of de-gendering has gained much attention, especially in policy analysis (Saxonberg, 2013). Aside from policy texts, degenderization is also reflected in various forms, such as literature (Li, 2023), slash fiction (Floegel, 2020), etc.

In China, despite deliberate official avoidance, the likelihood of de-gendering remains reflected in some of the online content disseminated in the media. The growing social support of online forums of queers, fandom for non-binary online fiction (including *Danmei*¹, A/B/O², etc.), and manifestation challenging the existing gender role all indicate the prevailing tendency of degenderization in China (Guo, 2021).

Examining the explanation of convergence of the Fourth-love practitioners in China,

there is a substantial number of scholars suggesting a correlation between de-gendered content and queer development of queer identity in their studies. Akita et al. (2013) have traced the image of queers, and the manifestation of gender roles will affect one's attitude towards gender binarism and diversity. Selkie et al. (2020) revealed that emotional and informational support (knowledge) in social media plays vital roles in developing self-identification. Miller (2016) also emphasised the importance of critical media queer literacy. To summarise, de-gendered information in various content forms and communication channels can impact queer identity in distinct ways.

Nevertheless, given the seeming variation in the effects of de-gendered content among homosexuals, few studies have systematically and dynamically examined the development of self-identity in specific homosexual groups. Within our research, we mainly focus on practitioners of the Fourth-love cultivated in China's particular media context. More finely, by generalising the corrupted content they are exposed to, we aim to conceptualise the impact of the media towards their self-identified progression.

Queer heterosexuality and the Fourth-love

The Fourth-love relates to several well-researched concepts, such as heterosexual anal intercourse (HAI) (Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014; McBride & Fortenberry, 2010) or the anal sex of gays (Moskowitz & Hart, 2011). Nonetheless, the previous observations and interviews unveil that most of the Fourth-love practitioners in China refuse to identify themselves as homosexual, as most of them indicated they sense physical attraction

from the opposite sex. In light of these positions, we decided to construe the Fourth-love within the framework of queer heterosexuality and to view the behaviour as a socially structured non-normative sexual act that occurs in heterosexuality.

The term "queer" was established in the 1990s to denote a suspension of fixed categories of gendered and sexual orientation that interrupts heteronormativity and acknowledges the human rights of diverse people (Miller, 2016). Queer heterosexuality is a branch of the queers, as the Fourth-love practitioner is deemed as a distinctive Chinese practice of it. Within queer heterosexuality, non-normative sexuality was a vital issue to be discussed. In the past, anal sex was often equated to "gay sex" (McBride & Fortenberry, 2010), but more recently, consolidated evidence suggests that male-to-male anal sex exists between two heterosexual men (Silva, 2017). As regards, it suggests that sexual behaviour does not consistently align with their heteronormative self-identity. Whereby non-normative sexual behaviours are essentially ideologically and socially constructed (Aguilar, 2017).

Across all sexual behaviours, the concept of "pegging", as first defined by Savage (1999), bears the closest resemblance to the practice of Fourth love. Apart from China, certain groups have evolved for specific non-normative sexual behaviours, for instance, sex advice columnist Dan Savage and his readers (Aguilar, 2017). Concerning the nature of dildos in feminism, scholars remain in the debate over whether it challenges structural heteronormativity (Reich, 1992) or merely creates a blurred zone for the

heterosexual/homosexual binary entrenched in queer and heterosexual privilege (Minge & Zimmerman, 2009).

Considering that the Fourth-love in China goes hand in hand with pegging, we may reasonably infer that the socialisation and popularisation of the Fourth-love phenomenon shed light on the dynamics of sexual power and the landscape of gender diversity within the Chinese social milieu.

Attractions of the Fourth-love

At the individual level, the examination of milestones in identity development of queer holds significant importance within the realm of queer heterosexuality. Hence, it is critical to find the crucial link between the sexual power dynamics at the societal level and the self-identification process at the individual level.

According to a meta-analysis by Hall et al. (2021), the typical milestones in the development of queer identity experienced: awareness of queer attraction, questioning one's sexual orientation, self-identifying, coming out, engaging in sexual activity, and initiating a romantic relationship. Given the varying paths actors undertake in their developmental path, characterised by dynamic and often cyclical processes, our study primarily concentrates on the initial milestone: awareness of queer attraction, which is both an essential step undergoing the milestone and as well as a susceptible personal-level factor of external influences.

Current studies on attraction in the field of sexual orientation and identity mainly focus on its measurement (the first time, strength, etc.) and its social impact rather than conceptualising the term due to the complexity of gender typology (McClelland et al., 2016). Researchers often focus on specific groups to generalise and conceptualise their attraction. For instance, McClelland et al. (2016) uncovered the role of specific sentiments, relationships with other young women, and social contexts, encompassing media images, as being centrepieces of young lesbian and bisexual women's initial attraction experiences. It suggests that specific attractions can be socially and ideologically constructed. Furthermore, Savin-Williams and Vrangalova (2013), utilising empirical data, validated that heterosexual attraction is a continuum as well.

Thus, referring to our research, the Fourth-love practitioners insisted on a sense of opposite-sex attraction, which is deemed distinguished from homosexual one and yet different from the conventional attraction for opposite-sex. In that, it is crucial to examine and conceptualise the specifics of attraction of the Fourth-love practitioner and how the degendered content in media activates this unique attraction. Hence, we address two research questions as follows:

RQ.1 How does the degendered content in media activate the attraction of the Chinese Fourth-love practitioners? Moreover, what are the specifics of their attraction?

RQ. 2 What is the conceptual framework of this process?

Research Method

This research adopts a qualitative research approach to the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), which diverges from the classical and proceduralised approach by situating the researchers in an interpretive, analytical perspective, whereby the researcher unpacks and analyzes the lives, sentiments, and behaviours of the participants to comprehend and unravel the constructed implications thereof (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz & Bryant, 2011).

The two authors of this paper, cognizant of gender studies and the Fourth-love group, have interactively engaged in deliberation with reflection during the data analysis to ensure the authors' positionality and trustworthiness, along with the validity and credibility of the study.

The recruitment underwent two rounds, from which six males and nine females, totalling 15 participants, completed the first phase of semi-structured in-depth interviews. This result stems from the fact that the majority of respondents encountered in recruitment were female, while also revealing the unequal distribution of both genders in the Fourth-love community. Participants were predominantly sought from forums in social media platforms where Fourth-love practitioners are active, i.e., Weibo and Douban, by posting recruitment posts. While ensuring participants were entirely involved in the Fourth-love group, we narrowed them down to individuals who have had Fourth-love-related experiences (sexual and romantic) and self-defined themselves

as a "Fourth-love practitioner" to maximize the accuracy and rigour of the sample. Also, to fulfil the Ethical criteria, we selected respondents over 20 years old during the screening process.

Owing to the absence of a precise academic definition of the Fourth-love and the presence of ambiguous self-identification and unclear perceptions in general, an open-ended pre-interview was conducted in this study to determine the main research frame and the protocol of the interviews to ascertain their legitimacy and applicability.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and online via voice chat, with an overall duration of half an hour to one hour. The research team had declared at the onset of the interviews that they would be recorded but presented anonymously in the study with signed consent forms from the interviewees. Interviews follow a sequenced progression of three main sections of questions as follows: a) In what way did you learn about the Fourth-love? b) How did you discover you were predisposed to the Fourth-love? c) What led you to be aware of yourself as a Fourth-love practitioner and join the community?, and in which the questions were refined for each participants.

Data analysis

For all transcripts collected in Phase 1, one author accomplished verbatim coding alone utilizing Nvivo (v.12) as the principal analytic tool and set aside approximately 30% of the interviews (n=4) for recursive coding with another author, which culminated in 182

relevant codes and 16 subcategories. Charmaz's (2014) analytic logic was employed in the analysis process, whereby new concepts and categories evolved iteratively by continuously comparing datasets until the prevailing conceptual framework emerged.

Findings at current stage

All participants explicitly stated in the interviews that their initial knowledge of the Fourth-love was derived from the media, namely search engines, social media, publications, etc., and provided us with in-depth descriptions of their self-perceived journeys. The analyses yielded an initial set of sixteen focus codes, nine sub-themes, and three core themes, and we synthesised them into a linear and mechanistic conceptual framework. As shown in Figure 1, the conceptual framework of the perception of attraction for Fourth-love practitioners can be interpreted as follows: from the de-gendered content of the media that creates the stimulus to undergoing perceptual and cognitive processes that act as mediators, culminating in the emergence of the Fourth-love attraction.

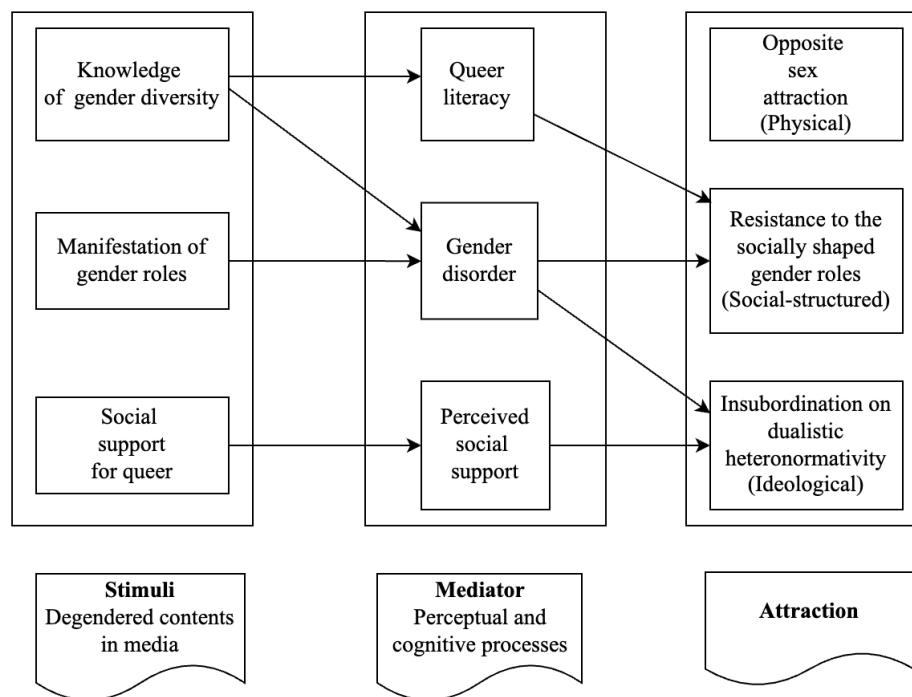


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of awareness of attraction of the Fourth-love practitioner in China

As the research still needs to be finalised with an insufficient sample size acquired, we remain considering at this stage whether to include the exploration of transmission paths. However, based on our conceptualisation and the current view, the transmission paths after the encounter with the media content may be classified into the following: media communication (direct), interpersonal communication (indirect), and organisational communication (indirect).

During the theoretical coding phase, we merged three subcategories into one core category of potentially exposed de-gendered content stimuli: a) *knowledge of gender diversity*, including exposure towards queers and gender-related knowledge; b)

manifestation of gender roles comprising of gender stereotypes and non-binary gender narratives; and c) *social support*, featuring subcodes of social inclusiveness, anti-discriminatory discourses, etc. The variables above are concretely supportable in the literature, and we validated them through analyses that allowed them greater focus and precision.

Subsequently, we found through collation coding that there are mediating mechanisms that are predominantly perceptual and reflective processes in proceeding final attraction, including d) *queer literacy*, with attitude and knowledge of queer; e) *gender disorder*, including gender entitlement perceptions, gender stereotypes awareness, f) *perceived social support*, consisting efficacy and consequences of reverse gender roles.

Via the above routes, the Fourth-love practitioner eventually arises an attraction to the Fourth-love and ultimately realises that he or she is a practitioner, representing one of the predominant breakthroughs of the present study. Factors that explain this can currently be summarised as: g) *the natural biological opposite-sex attraction*, as almost all of the participants clearly stated that they are heterosexual, with male participants highlighting this in particular; h) *resistance to socially shaped gender roles*, with participants stating that such roles as men should be the breadwinners and women parenting under the established framework of the society, causes them to perceive psychological stress, and the awareness of Fourth-love enables them to realise that male and female gender roles can be breached, especially regarding sexual behaviour, as

most of the female indicates they obtained psychological pleasure only; i) *insubordinate to dualistic heteronormativity*, participants generally expressed the notion of non-binary, with an implicit dissatisfaction with the current dualistic view of gender within them. It also reveals that they see Fourth-love as a non-binary intimate relationship in which gender is fluid.

Besides, we presently found explicit influential relationships between the variables during the coding process, as shown in the figure, and we shall continue to examine and probe the relevant routes of relations between them in the upcoming research.

Contributions and further research

This study contributes to both theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, we draw new perspectives to queer theory and anal sex, which also provides empirical and new approaches towards gender diversity. We explore the link between the dissemination of de-gendered content and the development of queer identity in China, which further indicates the social construction of heterosexuality. Practically, this study sought to raise awareness and lessen the community's stigmatisation by addressing the ignorance of its notion and sexual behaviour.

We anticipate adding at least five more participants to the following research phase, supplementing both the diversity and size of the sample to validate ultimate saturation.

Further, due to the uniqueness and groundbreaking of the community, we aim to undertake long-term observation and research on other aspects, such as community ecology, social identity, stigmatisation, and their consensus.

Note

1. *Danmei: a genre of fiction describing homoromantic between men, similar to 'Slash Fiction.'*

2. *A/B/O: a genre of fiction with a gender typology consisting of three categories - alpha, beta, and omega - in addition to the traditional male/female binary sex/gender system.*

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