



Heterosexual Marital Intention: The Influences of Confucianism and Stigma Among Chinese Sexual Minority Women and Men

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Abstract

In traditional Confucianist culture in China, marriage and offspring are highly valued, placing sexual minority adults under tremendous pressure to marry an opposite sex partner. This study explored how Confucianism and stigma were associated with the intention to pursue a heterosexual marriage among Chinese sexual minority individuals as well as the moderating mechanisms of gender and age. Cross-sectional data were collected from 747 participants via online social networks from March to June 2020. Items assessed Confucianism values (communalism, filial piety, traditional gender roles); stigma (rejection sensitivity, social discrimination); and heterosexual marital intention (HMI). A total of 1.7% ($n = 12$) participants had ever been married, 11.6% ($n = 87$) planned to marry a different-sex partner, 60.4% ($n = 451$) had no intention to pursue a heterosexual marriage, and 26.4% ($n = 197$) had no specific marital plan. Bisexual participants scored significantly higher than homosexual individuals in HMI. Sexual minority adults with high levels of Confucianism and stigma were more likely to intend to marry. Importantly, both individual stigma (rejection sensitivity) and interpersonal stigma (social discrimination) partially mediated the relationship between Confucianism and HMI. Confucianism had a stronger impact on HMI for men than women, and age moderated the influence of Confucianism (including communalism and filial piety) on HMI, with a stronger impact for younger than older generations. This study contributes to a better understanding of how Confucianism and stigma may be connected to the intention to pursue a heterosexual marriage, suggesting culture-modified theories of stigma and sexual minority stress are needed to explain the experiences of sexual minority people in contemporary China.

Keywords Sexual minority women and men · Confucianism · Stigma · Heterosexual marital intention · Sexual orientation

Introduction

Heterosexual marriage of sexual minority adults has been a controversial social issue in China, having a negative impact on the mental health of both sexual minority adults and their opposite-sex partners (Chow et al., 2013; Li et al., 2016). Variation in the legalization of same-sex marriage between countries in the West and China might be one of the main reasons for the disparity in the occurrence of sexual minority adults' heterosexual marital choice. Previous studies

indicate that in Canada, 4% of sexual minority men marry a different sex partner (Hirshfield et al., 2008), and in the USA, the figure is approximately 4–10% (Jeffries, 2009; Pathela et al., 2006). In China, 17–20% of sexual minority men have been involved in heterosexual marriage (Chow et al., 2011; Steward et al., 2013), and one third of gay and bisexual men had the intention to pursue a heterosexual marriage (Shi et al., 2020). Among lesbians and gay men, 14.2% were ever-married, one fifth of unmarried adults planned to marry a different-sex partner, and of those 15.1% planned to engage in an opposite-sex marriage with a lesbian or gay person (Wen & Zheng, 2020). Same-sex marriage remains illegal in the Chinese context. Gay-lesbian marriage could be a cooperative marriage between the partners without the reality of the roles of husband and wife (Ren et al., 2019). This arrangement serves as a compromise to the cultural reality, as it harmonizes individuals' interpersonal relationships and traditional Chinese family values without the individuals being forced into a true heterosexual marriage.

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China's "one-child" policy, officially abolished in 2016, permitted couples only one offspring. This policy complicated the situation for sexual minority only children, as when these only children near the marital life stage, they feel tremendous pressure from families to have biological children themselves despite it being illegal for same-sex couples to do so (Deutsch, 2006). Therefore, sexual minority women and men in China often conceal their sexual identity and marry a heterosexual partner to maintain one's personal and family reputation, reproduce, and maintain privacy around their true sexual orientation (Ren et al., 2019).

Confucianism and Heterosexual Marital Intention

In addition to adverse marriage laws and the recently altered "one-child" policy as they impact the lives of sexual minority adults, culture may also be a prominent factor in determining heterosexual marriage in this community. People in Eastern countries such as China, Japan, and Vietnam are dominated by Confucianism values, which may be less tolerant and perpetuate negative images of homosexual individuals (Adamczyk & Cheng, 2015). Confucianism (also called Confucian culture or collectivistic values) entails a set of sociopolitical views that are paternalist, prioritize hierarchical authority, place a heavy emphasis on the family, and are more community or collectivist-oriented (Koo et al., 2012). All of these values are meant to promote order and consensus in a society. Not marrying by a certain age might be regarded as abnormal, suspect of disease or illness, and even result in disgrace (Zhao, 2010). There are limited data regarding level of belief in Confucianism and HMI, especially among sexual minority adults in China (Wen & Zheng, 2020).

Communalism, filial piety, and traditional gender roles are the main elements of Confucianism (Nguyen & Angelique, 2017). Communalism demands that individuals belong firstly to the state, then to the family, rather than to themselves. Sexual minority adults living in communalist cultures need to give priority to collectivity and family (Koo et al., 2014; Krys et al., 2019). Communalism provides society and family the utmost significance in defining an individual's self-worth through absolute heterosexual terms (Nguyen & Angelique, 2017). Being a sexual minority individual may be considered "a failure" or cause an individual to "lose face" with one's family because such individuals fail to fulfill basic heterosexual social obligations in the Chinese context, including marriage and producing children. Thus, sexual minority adults may be inclined to conceal their sexual orientation and marry a different sex partner to avoid becoming a disgrace to their family and community (Huang et al., 2016).

Filial piety refers to societal obligations required of children with respect to their elders, including showing respect, care, and support for their parents (Park & Chesla, 2007). It is a family-centered cultural belief that children are expected to

sacrifice their physical, economic, and social interests for the benefit of their parents or families (Bian et al., 1998). Learning to be a filial offspring is an essential first step toward being an acceptable adult member of Confucian culture (Ho et al., 2012). Filial piety emphasizes the continuity of the family line, which is seen as one of the most significant duties of family members. Sexual minority adults in China often feel pressure from family members when they reach marital age because of this requirement to marry and reproduce heirs (Wong et al., 2019).

Traditional gender roles emphasize cultural standards of femininity and masculinity for women and men, and non-binary genders are not officially recognized in China. Both women and men are expected to fulfill adulthood gender roles including marriage and reproduction (Li et al., 2010; Yan et al., 2011). Traditional family values, specifically traditional gender stereotypes, may lead to a desire for parenthood among Chinese sexual minority adults (Wang & Zheng, 2021). Marriage and family integrity and maintaining traditional gender roles allow an individual to properly observe social roles, thereby producing happiness in this cultural view (Li et al., 2010). Homosexual individuals may be regarded as violating traditional role relationships and perceived as gender nonconforming (Whitley & Aegisdottir, 2000). Therefore, Chinese sexual minority adults, regardless of gender, who hold more traditional Confucian values may be likely to engage in heterosexual marriage or hold a stronger intention to pursue one. To investigate this, the first aim of this study was to explore the relationship between Confucianism and heterosexual marital intention (HMI) of Chinese sexual minority women and men.

Stigma and Heterosexual Marital Intention

Sexual minority individuals may be significantly more likely to suffer from mental distress than heterosexual counterparts, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation or attempts (Fergusson et al., 2005; Mereish et al., 2018; Saewyc et al., 2011; van Bergen et al., 2013). Minority stress theory can partially explain the source of this mental health disparity. This theory argues that, compared with heterosexual counterparts, sexual minority individuals are disproportionately exposed to environmental disadvantage, including proximal minority stressors such as microaggressions and distal minority stressors such as laws that are not inclusive or protective of sexual minority individuals (Meyer, 2003). Moreover, bisexual individuals are more likely to be viewed as having unstable sexual identities or as being sexually irresponsible (Garelick et al., 2017). Bisexual individuals generally fare worse than homosexual individuals, experiencing discrimination from the heterosexual community as well as the lesbian and gay community (Roberts et al., 2015). Bisexual health

disparities can be found in psychosocial health issues and health risk behaviors (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Friedman et al., 2014). In the Chinese context, the discriminatory environment facing sexual minority individuals may make it more likely for bisexual individuals to pursue heterosexual marriage in order to reduce societal pressures and the associated stress.

Minority stress theory also posits that stigma is a fundamental stressor in the health of sexual minority individuals. Stigma and minority stress theories suggest that stigma occurs at multiple levels (structural/cultural, interpersonal, and individual), affecting the health of sexual minority individuals (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016). Structural stigma refers to societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and policies that may directly affect sexual minority individuals (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014). In China, structural or cultural stigma relevant to sexual minority individuals is reflected in the law's lack of recognition of same-sex marriage, the "one child" policy, and Confucian culture.

Interpersonal stigma refers to interactional processes, including prejudice and discrimination, that occur during social interactions (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016). Social discrimination has been shown to contribute to Chinese sexual minority adults' engagement in unhealthy behaviors such as daily tobacco use, frequent binge drinking, and other substance use (Xu et al., 2019, 2020). A qualitative study that included interviews with 30 Chinese sexual minority men revealed that stigma constituted a critical challenge for these men and was associated with their decisions around identity disclosure and marriage (Steward et al., 2013).

Individual levels of stigma refer to individuals' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to stigma such as rejection sensitivity, internalized homophobia, and concealment of sexual orientation (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016). Sexual minority individuals often anticipate rejection because of past experiences with prejudice and discrimination either personally or toward their group (Frible et al., 1990; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). Sensitivity to possible rejection may lead to adverse mental health conditions (Mereish et al., 2018; Pachankis et al., 2018; Salway et al., 2019) and/or substance use (Pachankis et al., 2014). Recent quantitative studies revealed that both internalized homophobia and concealment of sexual orientation may contribute to heterosexual marriage of Chinese sexual minority individuals (Shi et al., 2020; Wen & Zheng, 2020). Similarly, high levels of rejection sensitivity may encourage sexual minority adults to choose heterosexual marriage. However, no study has explored this relationship to date. Given the dearth of research in this area, particularly in the Chinese context, the second study aim was to explore the relationship between social-ecological stigma and HMI.

Mediating Role of Individual and Interpersonal Stigma

Compared with sexual minority men in the West, Chinese sexual minority men may feel a higher level of internalized homophobia (Pyun et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2017) and may be more vulnerable to social discrimination and internalized homophobia than their heterosexual counterparts (Ching et al., 2018). Recent studies have found that for sexual minority individuals living in Confucian cultures, individuals with traditional beliefs, including blind obedience toward parents, displayed more internalized homophobia than those without traditional beliefs (Lin et al., 2016; Nguyen & Angelique, 2017). This may be related to more traditional individuals rejecting their true identity and worrying about experiencing rejection. Limited research has focused on the relationship between personal beliefs in Confucianism and internalized stigma.

Individual and interpersonal levels of stigma may play a mediating role in the link between Confucianism and HMI. Filial piety has been found to be associated with sexual minority adults' HMI (Wen & Zheng, 2020). Stigma also plays an essential role in sexual minority adults' HMI (Shi et al., 2020; Steward et al., 2013). However, little information is currently available for these mediation mechanisms. The third study aim was to examine how individual and interpersonal levels of stigma may mediate the link between Confucianism and HMI.

Potential Moderating Effects of Gender and Age

Confucian traditional gender roles require that men (but not women) be regarded as the continuation of their descendants, giving men more social status and power than women in such societies (Wong et al., 2019). In collectivist cultures, unmarried men are less tolerated than unmarried women, and negative perceptions of gay men are higher than that of lesbians (Kite & Whitley, 1996; Lin et al., 2016). One study showed that gay men's willingness to enter heterosexual marriage in China was significantly higher than that of lesbians (Wen & Zheng, 2020). Hence, the fourth study aim was to examine the moderating effects of gender, specifically, whether sexual minority men may be more influenced by Confucianism in marrying an opposite sex partner than sexual minority women.

With the globalization process, Chinese economic development, social norms, and marital and birthing values have changed over the past four decades (Hu & Jacqueline, 2016). Younger generations of Chinese are more open and modern (Wang et al., 2011), and perceptions of sexual minority individuals have improved (Savin-Williams, 2008). However, few studies have explored the moderating effect of age on Chinese sexual minority women and men's HMI. Therefore, the last

study aim was to determine whether younger sexual minority adults may be less likely to be influenced by Confucianism in marrying an opposite sex partner as compared to older sexual minority adults.

The Current Study

Due to same-sex marriage being illegal and same-sex relationships being relatively hidden in China, an alternative and more private way to collect research data in such a setting is through online surveys. Using a cross-sectional online survey of sexual minority individuals in China, we tested the following hypotheses: (1) Sexual minority women and men with high beliefs in Confucianism (communalism, filial piety, traditional gender roles) and stigma (rejection sensitivity, social discrimination) will be more likely to marry an opposite-sex partner; (2) Both individual and interpersonal levels of stigma will mediate the relationship between Confucianism and HMI; (3) Both gender and age will moderate the association between Confucianism and HMI for Chinese sexual minority women and men.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We recruited participants from March to June 2020 using convenience sampling from several Chinese social networking platforms such as Baidu Post-Bar and Douban groups (gay forums of popular websites in China), Sina Weibo (a popular social networking website in China like Facebook), and social networking applications including WeChat and QQ (two popular chat tools in China) targeting sexual minority individuals. Advertisements on the platforms stated that the academic research called for the recruitment of sexual minority adults regarding an “HMI Survey in mainland China.” We described our recruitment and data collection process in detail in prior work (Xu et al., 2018a, 2018b). Informed consent was obtained from all participants by presenting a description of the study on the website and the participant needing to click “continue” to begin. Participants then went on to complete a questionnaire available at the professional survey website Wenjuanxing. Upon completion, the volunteers received 15 Chinese Yuan by leaving a Zhi-fubao (a money transfer application) account number. The study program was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Sichuan University (No. K2018063).

A total of 838 participants completed the questionnaire. Study eligibility criteria included: individuals aged ≥ 18 years who were able and willing to provide consent and live in mainland China. As such, 91 participants were excluded. The final sample consisted of 747 participants, including

322 (43.1%) lesbian women, 64 (8.6%) bisexual women, 339 (45.4%) gay men, and 22 (2.9%) bisexual men. The mean age of the sample was 22.54 years ($SD = 3.97$ years), ranging from 18 to 51 years.

Measures

Sociodemographic Information Demographic characteristics included gender, age, location, education, occupation, and annual income (detailed in Table 1).

Sexual orientation identity Participants’ sexual orientation identity was assessed with the question, “Do you consider yourself to be...?” They answered using one of six response options: *lesbian*, *bisexual woman*, *gay*, *bisexual man*, *heterosexual person*, and *others*. Participants who self-identified as heterosexual or others were excluded from this study.

Confucianism We measured Confucian values using the Confucian Value Scale (Feng et al., 2012; Nguyen & Angelique, 2017). The scale consists of 23 items measuring communalism (9 items), filial piety (7 items), and traditional gender roles (7 items), which are among the most substantial components of Confucianism. Communalism included items such as “One needs to conform to one’s family or society’s expectations.” Filial piety included items such as “One should fulfill parents’ dreams rather than one’s own.” Traditional gender roles included items such as “Men are expected to achieve career success more than women.” Participants responded to items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 4 = *strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating higher endorsement of Confucianism. Items were translated into Chinese by two authors. The Cronbach’s α for this sample for communalism, filial piety, and traditional gender roles was 0.73, 0.76, and 0.71, respectively.

Rejection sensitivity Rejection sensitivity was measured with the adapted Gay-Related Rejection Sensitivity Scale (Pachankis et al., 2008), which measures the anxiety and perceived likelihood of being rejected because of one’s sexual orientation. According to prior studies, the scale is suitable for both sexual minority women and men (Feinstein et al., 2012; Shao et al., 2018). There are 14 items describing different situations where one could experience rejection, such as “Your colleagues are celebrating a co-worker’s birthday at a restaurant, but you are not invited.” Participants first indicated how concerned or anxious they would be if the situation occurred because of their sexual orientation (1 = *very unconcerned* to 6 = *very concerned*). They then indicated the likelihood that this situation occurred because of their sexual orientation (1 = *very unlikely* to 6 = *very likely*). The final score for the concern and likelihood items are multiplied for each of the 14 items and averaged (Pachankis et al., 2008). Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety and likelihood of being rejected because of one’s sexual orientation. Items

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants by gender and sexual orientation ($N = 747$)

Age (M/SD)	Women ($n; \%$)				Men ($n; \%$)			
	Lesbian		Bisexual		Gay		Bisexual	
	22.40	3.10	21.91	2.61	22.94	4.67	20.27	5.60
<i>Location</i>								
Rural area	16	5.0	5	7.8	22	6.5	1	4.5
Urban area	32	9.9	4	6.3	36	10.6	2	9.1
General city	122	37.9	23	35.9	78	23.0	10	45.5
Provincial capital	103	32.0	26	40.6	91	26.8	6	27.3
Megalopolis	49	15.2	6	9.4	112	33.0	3	13.6
<i>Education</i>								
Junior high or lower	4	1.2	2	3.1	4	1.2	1	4.5
Senior high	52	16.1	6	9.4	24	7.1	7	31.8
College	251	78.0	46	71.9	253	74.6	13	59.1
Postgraduate or higher	15	4.7	10	15.6	58	17.1	1	4.5
<i>Occupation</i>								
Student	149	46.3	39	60.9	194	57.2	11	50.0
Employed	111	34.5	17	26.6	111	32.7	10	45.5
Others	62	19.3	8	12.5	34	10.0	1	4.5
<i>Annual income</i>								
<¥10,000	126	39.1	28	43.8	165	48.7	10	45.5
¥10,000~¥80,000	137	42.5	32	50	115	33.9	8	36.4
>¥80,000	59	18.3	4	6.3	59	17.4	4	18.2
<i>Marital intention</i>								
Ever-married	0	0.0	2	3.1	9	2.7	1	4.5
Intend to marry	19	5.9	15	23.4	46	13.6	7	31.8
No marital intention	222	68.9	16	25.0	207	61.1	6	27.3
No definite plan	81	25.2	31	48.4	77	22.7	8	36.4
<i>Confucianism (M/SD)</i>								
Communalism	2.39	0.35	2.39	0.40	2.48	0.45	2.69	0.44
Filial piety	1.94	0.38	2.01	0.42	2.07	0.48	2.36	0.56
Traditional gender roles	1.69	0.31	1.74	0.33	1.91	0.44	2.19	0.58
<i>Stigma (M/SD)</i>								
Rejection sensitivity	7.81	5.35	9.12	5.93	11.05	6.69	12.14	6.44
Social discrimination	1.61	0.40	1.57	0.42	1.84	0.50	1.95	0.77
Marital intention (M/SD)	12.81	22.09	40.48	28.52	21.19	28.61	51.32	30.17

were translated into Chinese by two authors. The Cronbach's α was 0.95 for this study.

Social discrimination Social discrimination was measured with the China MSM Stigma Scale (Neilands et al., 2008), which measures sexual minority men's experience of social discrimination due to their sexual orientation. The scale was expanded to be used with sexual minority women (Logie & Earnshaw, 2015). The scale has 10 items, including "Are you often beaten or excluded because of homosexuality/bisexuality?" Each item had four response options: 1 = *never*, 2 = *once or twice*, 3 = *a few times*, and 4 = *many times*, with higher total scores indicating higher levels of social discrimination. Items were translated into Chinese by two authors. The Cronbach's α was 0.76 for this study.

Heterosexual marital intention The intention to pursue a heterosexual marriage was measured in two distinct ways. First, participants were asked to report their HMI: ever-married (including divorced, engaged in a gay-lesbian marriage, or engaged in a mixed-orientation marriage), intend to marry (including intend to marry a heterosexual partner or to engage in a gay-lesbian marriage), no HMI (do not intend to marry at all), and no definite plan. Second, participants chose a score on a scale from 0 to 100 to indicate the intention to pursue a heterosexual marriage, with higher scores indicating greater likelihood or intention to marry a heterosexual person.

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 22.0. First, descriptive statistics for sociodemographic variables were calculated. Second, Pearson's correlations were used to evaluate the bivariate associations among Confucianism, stigma, and HMI. Then, a mediation analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that stigma mediated the relationship between Confucianism and HMI. This analysis was conducted using Preacher and Hayes's, (2008) bootstrapping procedures. This test of mediation was based on 5000 bootstrap resamples to produce the 95% confidence interval (CI) for the mediator and was used to test the significance of both total and indirect effects. The mediation model was considered significant if zero was not contained within the 95% CI (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Finally, the moderation effects of gender and age on the relationship between Confucianism and HMI were analyzed.

Results

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Of the 747 included participants, 5.9% ($n = 44$) came from rural areas, 9.9% ($n = 74$) came from urban areas, 31.2% ($n = 233$) came from a general city, 30.3% ($n = 226$) came from a provincial capital, and 22.8% ($n = 170$) came from a megalopolis. In terms of education, 1.5% ($n = 11$) had a junior high school or lower education level, 11.9% ($n = 88$) had senior high school education, 75.4% ($n = 563$) had college education, and 11.2% ($n = 84$) had postgraduate or higher education. A total of 52.6% ($n = 393$) participants were currently students, 33.3% ($n = 249$) were employed, and 14.1% ($n = 105$) worked in other jobs. For annual income, 44.0% ($n = 329$) of participants earned less than 10,000 Chinese Yuan, 39.1% ($n = 292$) earned 10,000–80,000 Chinese Yuan, and 16.9% ($n = 126$) earned more than 80,000 Chinese Yuan.

Confucianism and Stigma

Detailed characteristics for Confucianism and stigma by gender and sexual orientation are shown in Table 1. Mean scores of communalism, filial piety, and traditional gender roles were 2.47 ($SD = 0.41$), 2.02 ($SD = 0.44$), and 1.81 ($SD = 0.41$), respectively. Mean scores of rejection sensitivity and social discrimination were 9.52 ($SD = 6.27$) and 1.72 ($SD = 0.48$), respectively. When assessing gender, men scored significantly higher than women in all dimensions of Confucianism: communalism ($M_{\text{men}} = 2.49$, $SD = 0.45$ vs. $M_{\text{women}} = 2.38$, $SD = 0.36$; $t = 3.58$, $p < 0.001$), filial piety ($M_{\text{men}} = 2.08$, $SD = 0.49$ vs. $M_{\text{women}} = 1.95$, $SD = 0.39$; $t = 3.88$, $p < 0.001$), and traditional gender roles ($M_{\text{men}} = 1.92$,

$SD = 0.46$ vs. $M_{\text{women}} = 1.70$, $SD = 0.33$; $t = 7.91$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, men scored significantly higher than women in both individual and interpersonal levels of stigma: rejection sensitivity ($M_{\text{men}} = 11.12$, $SD = 6.68$ vs. $M_{\text{women}} = 8.02$, $SD = 5.46$; $t = 6.95$, $p < 0.001$) and social discrimination ($M_{\text{men}} = 1.84$, $SD = 0.52$ vs. $M_{\text{women}} = 1.60$, $SD = 0.40$; $t = 7.13$, $p < 0.001$). There was no significant correlation between sexual orientation and Confucianism or stigma.

Heterosexual Marital Intention

Table 1 also presents the characteristics of HMI information. Of all 747 participants, 1.7% ($n = 12$) had ever been married, 11.6% ($n = 87$) planned to marry a different-sex partner, 60.4% ($n = 451$) had no intention to pursue a heterosexual marriage, and 26.4% ($n = 197$) had no specific plan.

The mean score of HMI was 20.12 ($SD = 27.62$), indicating a low overall HMI level for the sample. Regarding gender, men scored significantly higher than women in HMI ($M_{\text{men}} = 23.02$, $SD = 29.56$ vs. $M_{\text{women}} = 17.40$, $SD = 25.42$; $t = 2.79$, $p < 0.01$). For sexual orientation, bisexual individuals scored significantly higher than homosexual individuals in HMI ($M_{\text{bisexual individuals}} = 43.26$, $SD = 29.16$ vs. $M_{\text{homosexual individuals}} = 17.11$, $SD = 25.96$; $t = 8.66$, $p < 0.001$).

Correlations

Table 2 shows the correlations among variables. Significant weak and moderate positive correlations [Pearson's ρ (745) = 0.14–0.55, $p < 0.01$] were found between all dimensions of Confucianism, both individual (rejection sensitivity) and interpersonal (social discrimination) levels of stigma, and HMI.

Mediating Effect of Stigma

Detailed results of the mediating effects are shown in Table 3. Rejection sensitivity partially mediated the relationship between communalism and HMI of sexual minority women and men, $F(1, 745) = 26.29$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.03$. Specifically, communalism was significantly associated with rejection sensitivity ($a = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$), rejection sensitivity was significantly associated with HMI ($b = 0.10$, $p < 0.005$), and communalism was also significantly associated with HMI ($c = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of mediation was 0.02 (95% CI 0.01–0.04). Social discrimination also partially mediated the relationship between communalism and HMI, $F(1, 745) = 17.62$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.02$. Specifically, communalism was significantly associated with social discrimination ($a = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$), social discrimination was significantly associated with HMI ($b = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$), and communalism was significantly associated with HMI

Table 2 Correlations among Confucianism, stigma, and marital intention among Chinese sexual minorities

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Communalism	2.44	0.41	1					
2. Filial piety	2.02	0.44	0.55**	1				
3. Traditional gender roles	1.81	0.41	0.41**	0.49**	1			
4. Rejection sensitivity	9.52	6.27	0.19**	0.20**	0.22**	1		
5. Social discrimination	1.72	0.48	0.15**	0.22**	0.23**	0.46**	1	
6. Marital intention	20.12	27.62	0.22**	0.32**	0.31**	0.14**	0.17**	1

***p* < .01

Table 3 Mediating model of Confucianism values on marital intention among Chinese sexual minority women and men

IV–DV	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	SIE (95% CI [LI, UL])	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> ²
<i>Communalism–marital intention</i>						
Rejection sensitivity	0.18***	0.10**	0.21***	0.02 [0.01,0.04]	26.29***	0.03
Social discrimination	0.15***	0.13***	0.20***	0.02 [0.01,0.04]	17.62***	0.02
<i>Filial piety–marital intention</i>						
Rejection sensitivity	0.20***	0.08*	0.31***	0.02 [0.00,0.03]	21.87***	0.04
Social discrimination	0.21***	0.10**	0.30***	0.02 [0.01,0.04]	36.03***	0.05
<i>Traditional gender roles–marital intention</i>						
Rejection sensitivity	0.22***	0.08*	0.29***	0.02 [0.00,0.04]	36.47***	0.05
Social discrimination	0.23***	0.10**	0.29***	0.02 [0.01,0.05]	41.67***	0.05

IV independent variable, *DV* dependent variable, *a* path from independent variable to intermediary variable, *b* path from intermediary variable to marital intention, *c* remaining direct path from independent variable to marital intention, *SIE* standard indirect effect

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001

(*c* = 0.20, *p* < 0.001). The indirect effect of mediation was 0.02 (95% CI 0.01–0.04).

Similar to the mediating mechanism of individual and interpersonal levels of stigma between communalism and HMI, the relationship between filial piety and HMI was mediated by rejection sensitivity and social discrimination, respectively. Unique indirect effects were exhibited by rejection sensitivity (0.02; 95% CI 0.00–0.03) and social discrimination (0.02; 95% CI 0.01–0.04).

Similarly, both individual and interpersonal levels of stigma mediated the relationship between traditional gender roles and HMI. Unique indirect effects were exhibited by rejection sensitivity (0.02; 95% CI 0.00–0.04) and social discrimination (0.02; 95% CI 0.01–0.05).

Moderating Effect of Gender

All dimensions of Confucianism, including communalism ($\beta = 29.56, SE = 18.36, p < 0.001$), filial piety ($\beta = -37.76, SE = 13.91, p < 0.01$), and traditional gender roles ($\beta = 38.66, SE = 7.38, p < 0.001$), were significantly associated with HMI. The interactions between gender and all dimensions of Confucianism were significant. Specifically, communalism had a significantly stronger impact on HMI for men ($\beta = 18.84, SE = 3.14, p < 0.001$)

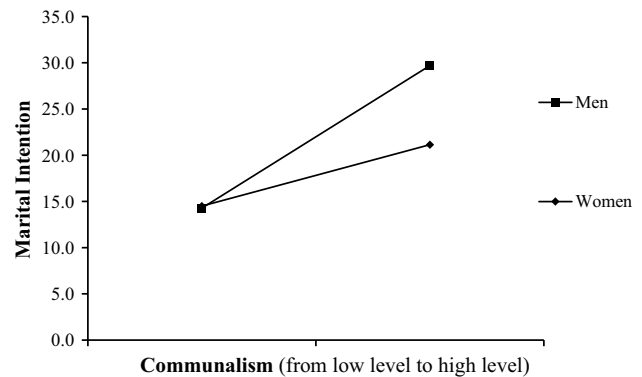


Fig. 1 Interaction between gender and communalism on marital intention of Chinese sexual minorities

than for women ($\beta = 8.12, SE = 3.81, p < 0.05$; shown in Fig. 1). Filial piety had a marginally stronger impact on HMI for men ($\beta = 22.98, SE = 2.82, p < 0.001$) than for women ($\beta = 14.98, SE = 3.44, p < 0.001$). Traditional gender roles had a significantly stronger impact on HMI for men ($\beta = 25.30, SE = 3.03, p < 0.001$) than for women ($\beta = 11.95, SE = 4.23, p < 0.05$). No significant interactions occurred between gender and individual or interpersonal levels of stigma.

Moderating Effect of Age

All dimensions of Confucianism, including communalism ($\beta = 15.89$, $SE = 2.44$, $p < 0.001$), filial piety ($\beta = 20.54$, $SE = 2.17$, $p < 0.001$), and traditional gender roles ($\beta = 21.70$, $SE = 2.41$, $p < 0.001$), significantly predicted HMI. The interactions between age and communalism and filial piety were significant. Communalism had a significantly stronger influence on HMI for younger participants ($-1 SD$; $\beta = 20.16$, $SE = 3.56$, $p < 0.001$) than for elder participants ($+1 SD$; $\beta = 11.63$, $SE = 3.07$, $p < 0.001$; shown in Fig. 2). Filial piety had a significantly stronger influence on HMI for younger participants ($-1 SD$; $\beta = 23.90$, $SE = 2.93$, $p < 0.001$) than for elder participants ($+1 SD$; $\beta = 17.19$, $SE = 2.80$, $p < 0.001$). No significant interactions occurred between age and individual or interpersonal levels of stigma.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the relationship between Confucianism (communalism, filial piety, and traditional gender roles), stigma (rejection sensitivity and social discrimination), and HMI of Chinese sexual minority women and men. We found that both Confucianism and stigma contributed to Chinese sexual minority adults' intention to marry. Importantly, both individual and interpersonal levels of stigma played a mediating role in the link between all dimensions of Confucianism and HMI. Moreover, gender and age had moderating effects between Confucianism and HMI, with Confucianism beliefs having a stronger impact for younger and male participants on marital intentions. Bisexual individuals had a greater intention to marry than homosexual individuals.

The proportion of sexual minority adults willing to enter heterosexual marriage in this sample was lower than shown in previous studies (Shi et al., 2020; Wen & Zheng, 2020).

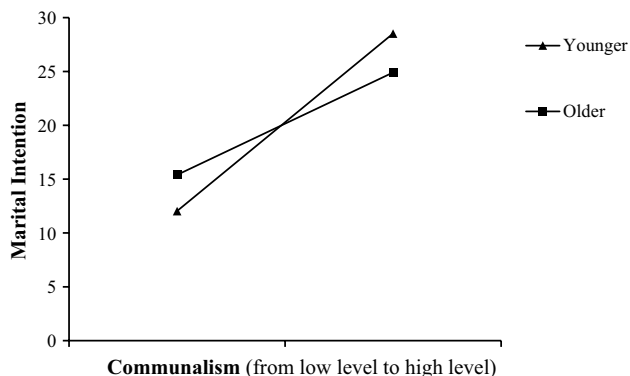


Fig. 2 Interaction between age and communalism on marital intention of Chinese sexual minorities

There are several possible reasons: first, the average age of the participants in this study is relatively young; the younger generation may be more open to the pursuit of freedom and equality for sexual minorities compared to older generations. They may not be willing to submit to the pressure of family and society to enter into heterosexual marriage, but instead choose to accompany their same-sex partners or go abroad to fulfill their love (Wen & Zheng, 2020). Secondly, 52.6% of the participants were students; compared with working people, they are less likely to be forced to marry by their parents because they are still focused on their studies. In addition, with the development of China's economy, increased globalization of ideas, as well as normalization of homosexuality in Chinese society, people's positive perceptions and tolerance of sexual minority individuals has gradually increased (Xie & Peng, 2018). This makes it more likely that sexual minority adults will maintain their same-sex partner choice and pursue their own happiness. However, the intention of sexual minority adults in China to pursue a heterosexual marriage was still higher than what has been found in Western countries (Hirshfield et al., 2008; Jeffries, 2009; Pathela et al., 2006). Due to the Confucian culture, the value of "family first" is internalized in the hearts of Chinese people, with the pressure to marry still ingrained even among sexual minority adults (Wong et al., 2019).

This is the first known study to explore the relationship between all key elements of Confucianism and the HMI of Chinese sexual minority women and men. Results showed that Confucianism was substantially connected to sexual minority adults' intention to marry. To meet societal pressure and not bring dishonor to families, sexual minority individuals often hide their sexual orientation (Chou, 2001; Steward et al., 2013). Thus, participants with high communalism may be more likely to marry. The higher the filial piety, the more likely sexual minority adults are to enter heterosexual marriage, which is consistent with previous research (Wen & Zheng, 2020). Marriage is one of the most important things in traditional Chinese culture (Lai, 2010) and one of the greatest expectations parents have for their children (Liu, 2013). Hence, filial piety could also facilitate HMI of sexual minority adults. Additionally, sexual minority adults with beliefs in traditional gender roles in this study had more intention to marry. In summary, under Confucian culture, Chinese people need to fulfill the social obligations of marriage and reproduction to continue the family bloodline (Li et al., 2010; Yan et al., 2011); Chinese sexual minority women and men are not exempt from these social expectations.

Rejection sensitivity played an essential role in HMI; individuals with higher levels were more likely to marry. This result is somewhat consistent with previous studies showing that internalized homophobia makes sexual minority adults more likely to choose to marry (Shi et al., 2020; Wen & Zheng, 2020). Social discrimination was also found

to facilitate sexual minority adults' heterosexual marriage intentions in this study, consistent with previous research (Wu et al., 2020). Sexual minority individuals may anticipate rejection because of their past experiences with prejudice and discrimination (Frable et al., 1990; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). Using a Chinese sample, the current study provided support for the minority stress theory with regards to sexual minority individuals' inequality and vulnerability; both individual and interpersonal levels of stigma were significantly related to HMI. The results also provided cross-cultural evidence for the expansion and extension of stigma and stress theories (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016).

To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore how Confucianism influenced individual and interpersonal levels of stigma for Chinese sexual minority women and men. Individuals with higher Confucianism beliefs were more inclined to experience stigma, which is consistent with previous research (Lin et al., 2016; Nguyen & Angelique, 2017). Confucianism tends to use strict heterosexual terms and potential regulations; for example, heterosexual marriage is seen as an important milestone in one's life (Li et al., 2015). The thoughts and behaviors of sexual minority individuals are contrary to the Confucian cultural norms; thus, the Confucianism beliefs made sexual minorities feel more marginalized and stigmatized.

Both individual and interpersonal levels of stigma mediated the relationship between Confucianism and HMI in this study, and Confucianism influenced HMI indirectly by influencing stigma. Confucianism tended to make sexual minority individuals feel more rejection sensitivity and experience more social discrimination, and both levels of stigma contributed to HMI. In other words, Confucianism, as a structural level of stigma, can make sexual minority individuals more aware of rejection sensitivity and social discrimination, thus making them more inclined to choose heterosexual marriage. This finding contributed to evidence supporting the stigma and stress theory; it highlighted the unique Chinese sociocultural circumstances and reflected the dilemma that Chinese sexual minority adults face when having to choose a marital partner in such a stigmatizing context.

Confucianism seemed to have more influence on HMI for sexual minority men than for women. In China, the illegal status of same-sex marriage presents great obstacles regarding spousal selection for sexual minority adults. Inheritance rights and parental homes were once reserved for sons in China (Zhang, 2004), and the legacy of the one-child policy continues to create challenges for men who are currently adults.

Contrary to the hypothesis, communalism and filial piety seemed to have more influence on HMI for younger than older participants. There are two possible explanations for this: first, participants in this study were relatively young; they may be less concerned with marriage at this point in

their lives. Second, but more importantly, for sexual minority adults, the intention to pursue a heterosexual marriage is closely related to homosexual identity development, such that adults with a stronger identity may have less HMI (Shi et al., 2020). Sexual minority adults may experience stronger identity development over time; thus, elder individuals' HMI may be less influenced by Confucianism than younger individuals who are still forming their identities. In contrast, no moderating effect was found between age and traditional gender roles on HMI, which may be because traditional one's gender role, compared with filial piety and communalism, is a more fixed factor regardless of age.

This study expanded research on the relationship between sexual identity and HMI, indicating bisexual individuals' intentions to pursue heterosexual marriage were significantly higher than that of homosexual individuals. On the one hand, this phenomenon could be explained by bisexual individuals' being the target of biphobia from both homosexual and heterosexual peers (Friedman et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2015). In order to avoid biphobia, it may be inferred that bisexual individuals prefer to marry heterosexual individuals. Aside from this, bisexual individuals may find romantic interest with a same or opposite sex partner, providing more opportunity for love-based heterosexual marriage than for lesbian and gay individuals.

Implications

There are several important implications from this research for society and sexual minority individuals. First, stigma is an important factor that hinders sexual minority adults from freely choosing their marriage partners. Though still a long way off in many contexts, governments may work toward ensuring the rights of sexual minority individuals and the inclusion of comprehensive sexual education (including minority sexuality) in schools. These structural level indicators of support for sexual minorities would signal to societies and new generations that social policies are fair, and the laws protect the rights and well-being of sexual minority individuals. These clear indicators of support will help to reduce the stigma and stress experienced by these groups. In the interim, social welfare organizations should provide psychological assistance and support to reduce the distress caused by holding a minority sexual identity until policies and social norms become more equitable for all sexual identities.

Second, one of the factors contributing to sexual minority adults' heterosexual marriage is traditional Confucian culture, which results in intense family pressure for those adhering to more traditional beliefs. Thus, for parents of sexual minority children, information regarding sexual minority issues could be communicated via the radio, television, internet, and social media to help families understand and respect variations in sexual orientation and offer affirmative

support. For sexual minority individuals themselves, support for dealing with family pressures that are inconsistent with their identities could be delivered through social work interventions, community assistance, and psychological counseling. In addition, given bisexual individuals' mental health status tends to be worse than that of homosexual and heterosexual individuals, psychotherapy institutions and programs should consider the possibility that bisexual patients and clients may face unique stressors different from lesbian and gay clients and treat them accordingly.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, given this research is cross-sectional, long-term trends for the outcome cannot be established, the analysis of association lacks temporal precedence, and the mediation analyses were exploratory. For future studies, other data collection methods would be needed to account for longitudinal outcomes. Second, the number of bisexual participants was low, reducing the capability to draw strong conclusions about this subgroup. Third, the average age of the participants in this study is young, and nearly half of them were students. However, the average age is consistent with the typical marriageable stage of Chinese youth, and students will face questions of marriage soon after graduation. Fourth, the online convenience sampling method may produce biased findings, which limits generalizability, especially to subgroups who are not active internet users or participants from rural areas.

Conclusion

In Chinese Confucian culture, sexual minority women and men face a conflict between homosexual attraction and heterosexual marriage pressure. Both traditional beliefs of Confucianism and stigma often lead to sexual minority individuals living in a way that is not a reflection of their authentic selves, which can have major implications for their health and well-being and that of their future families.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Ethical Approval All study procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Sichuan University prior to data collection.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study.

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