

Attachment Orientations among Lesbian/Bisexual Women and Gay/Bisexual Men in Mainland China: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Attachment theory has been widely applied to research on interpersonal relationships and emotional development. In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to attachment orientations among sexual minority populations, particularly lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. However, most existing studies have been conducted in Western societies (e.g., North America and Europe), while research focusing on Mainland China remains limited. The present systematic review examines existing literature on attachment orientations among sexual minorities in Mainland China, with particular attention to potential differences between lesbian/bisexual women and gay/bisexual men. A total of 32 studies were included in the review, encompassing theoretical discussions, Western empirical studies, and cultural analyses, as no direct empirical research on attachment orientations among sexual minorities in Mainland China was identified. The reviewed literature indicates that attachment insecurity among sexual minorities may be associated with minority stress, identity concealment, family expectations, and cultural norms surrounding marriage and filial obligation. Existing research on Mainland China remains heavily concentrated on public health issues and gay male populations, while research on lesbian and bisexual women is significantly underrepresented. The review also suggests that Chinese cultural values may shape attachment experiences differently from Western contexts. This study identifies key research gaps and highlights the need for culturally sensitive and gender-inclusive research on attachment among sexual minorities in Mainland China.

Keywords

attachment theory, sexual minorities, lesbian, gay, minority stress

1. Introduction

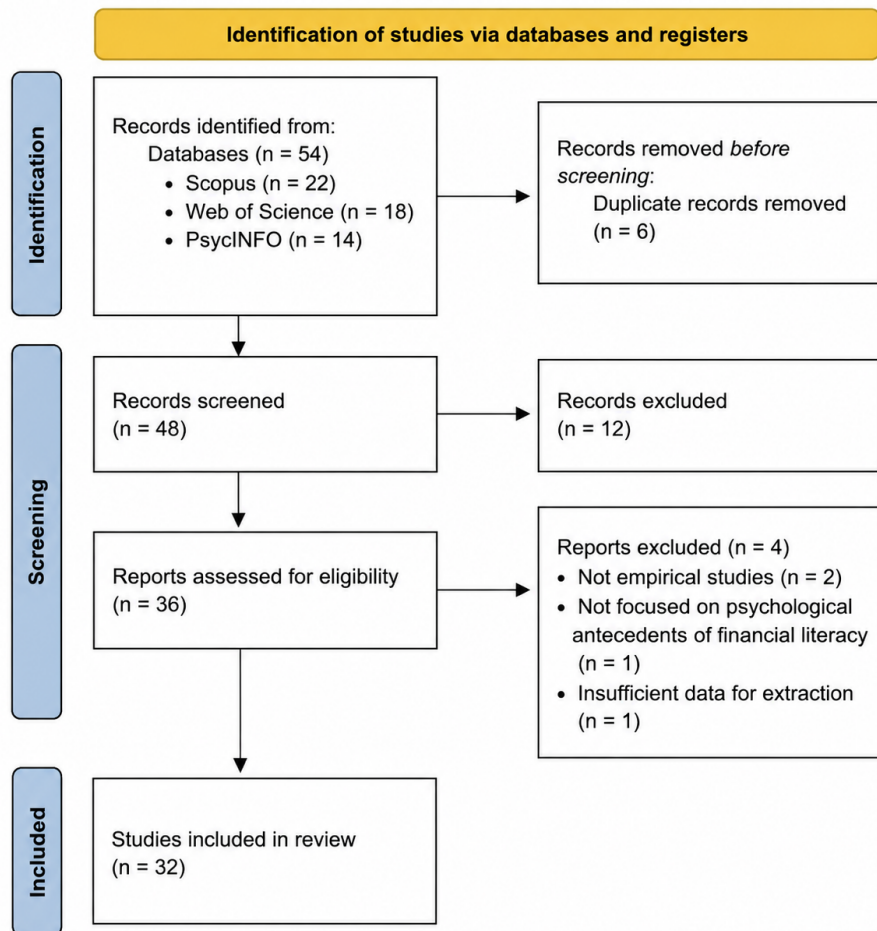
Attachment theory, originally developed by John Bowlby, proposes that early emotional bonds between children and caregivers shape subsequent interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, and psychological development [1]. Subsequent scholars such as Hazan and Shaver extended attachment theory to the domain of adult romantic relationships, identifying three major attachment orientations: secure attachment, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment [2,3]. Adult attachment orientations are further linked to relationship satisfaction, intimacy, emotional stability, and mental health outcomes [2,3]. In recent years, attachment theory has been increasingly applied to research on sexual minority populations [4]. Existing scholarship

demonstrates that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals may experience higher levels of attachment insecurity due to social stigma, discrimination, family rejection, and identity concealment [4,5]. Compared with heterosexual individuals, sexual minorities often encounter additional interpersonal and social stressors that may shape the development of emotional security and romantic relationships [4]. Western studies have found that insecure attachment is associated with lower relationship satisfaction, greater emotional distress, and poorer psychological well-being among LGBTQ individuals [6,7]. Research has also indicated potential gender differences in attachment orientations among sexual minorities. Some studies indicate that lesbian and bisexual women may report higher levels of anxious attachment, while gay and bisexual men may demonstrate relatively higher levels of avoidant attachment [5,8]. These differences are often explained by variations in gender socialization, emotional expression, and minority stress experiences. Nevertheless, findings remain inconsistent across studies, and the majority of current evidence originates from Western societies. Compared with Europe and North America, research on sexual minorities in Mainland China remains relatively underdeveloped [9,10]. Chinese society is characterized by collectivism, filial piety, family responsibility, and heteronormative expectations regarding marriage and reproduction [11,12]. Sexual minority individuals in China may therefore experience unique forms of pressure related to family obligations, social conformity, and identity concealment [9,13]. Existing literature on Chinese LGBTQ populations has primarily focused on public health issues, HIV prevention, and men who have sex with men (MSM), while studies examining romantic relationships, attachment orientations, and lesbian or bisexual women remain limited [14,15]. Additionally, minority stress theory suggests that chronic exposure to stigma, discrimination, and internalized heterosexism may negatively affect emotional security and interpersonal functioning [16,17]. In the Chinese context, pressures associated with family expectations and social invisibility may further complicate attachment experiences among sexual minorities [18]. Despite these important considerations, no comprehensive systematic review has examined attachment orientations among lesbian/bisexual women versus gay/bisexual men in Mainland China. Therefore, the present study systematically reviews existing literature concerning attachment orientations among sexual minorities in Mainland China. Given the limited availability of empirical evidence from Mainland China, this review primarily synthesizes theoretical perspectives and indirect empirical findings rather than conducting a quantitative synthesis of local studies [19]. Specifically, this review aims to examine current research characteristics, identify major findings regarding attachment patterns, explore the influence of Chinese cultural factors, and highlight existing research gaps. The paper is structured into five sections: theoretical background, literature review, discussion and synthesis, conclusion, and implications for future research.

2. Methodology

A systematic literature search was conducted across Google Scholar, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and CNKI to identify studies examining attachment orientations among sexual minorities in Mainland China. Keywords included terms related to sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, sexual minority, LGBTQ), attachment (attachment style, attachment orientation, adult attachment), and geographical location (China, Mainland China, Chinese). Searches were conducted in both English and Chinese with no date restrictions, and additional studies were identified through manual reference checking. Studies were included if they focused on lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals in Mainland China, investigated attachment or related psychological variables, and were published in peer-reviewed journals or book chapters. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on transgender populations, did not examine attachment, or drew from non-academic sources. All retrieved articles were screened by the author according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. After removing duplicates, titles and abstracts were reviewed, followed by full-text assessment. Any uncertainties during the screening process were resolved through careful re-evaluation of the full texts. Ultimately, 32 studies were included in the review. Each study was assessed for basic methodological quality (e.g., clarity of research aims, appropriateness of study design, transparency of reporting). No studies were excluded on quality grounds, but studies with notable limitations are critically discussed in the findings and marked in the reference list. For each study, information on authors, publication year, study design, sample characteristics, attachment measures, and main findings was extracted. Given the limited number of direct empirical studies, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted, grouping studies thematically according to attachment patterns, gender differences, minority stress effects, and Chinese cultural influences. The entire selection process is presented in a PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), outlining initial search results, duplicates removed, titles/abstracts screened, full-text assessed, and final studies included [20].

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process



Note. This PRISMA flow diagram illustrates the study selection process.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1 Attachment Theory

Attachment theory proposes that individuals develop internal working models of self and others through early interactions with caregivers [1]. These internal models subsequently shape expectations regarding intimacy, trust, and emotional dependency in adulthood. Adult attachment orientations are commonly categorized into secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment styles [3]. Individuals with secure attachment tend to display comfort with emotional intimacy and interpersonal trust [2]. In contrast, anxiously attached individuals often fear rejection and abandonment, while avoidantly attached individuals may suppress emotional needs and avoid relational closeness [3]. Research has consistently demonstrated that insecure attachment is associated with psychological distress, interpersonal conflict, emotional dysregulation, and lower relationship satisfaction [2]. Attachment theory has become increasingly influential in studies of romantic relationships among sexual minorities [4]. Researchers have argued that attachment orientations may shape identity development, emotional intimacy, communication patterns, and relationship stability among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals [21-23]. In addition, attachment insecurity may interact with external social pressures, creating unique psychological experiences for sexual minorities [6].

3.2 Minority Stress

Minority stress theory, primarily developed by Meyer and other scholars, explains how stigma-related stressors negatively affect the mental health and well-being of sexual minority populations [16,24]. According

to the theory, sexual minorities experience both general life stress and additional minority-specific stressors, including discrimination, victimization, identity concealment, internalized stigma, and social exclusion [17,24]. These chronic stressors may contribute to emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and relational difficulties [16]. Minority stress theory is particularly relevant to attachment research because repeated experiences of rejection or concealment may weaken interpersonal trust and emotional security [25]. Studies have found that minority stress can increase the likelihood of anxious or avoidant attachment patterns among LGBTQ individuals [6,25]. In addition, minority stress may operate differently across gender groups. Lesbian and bisexual women may experience gender-based discrimination alongside sexual minority stress [26], while gay and bisexual men may face distinct expectations regarding masculinity and emotional expression [8]. Such differences may partially explain variations in attachment orientations across sexual minority populations [5,8].

3.3 Chinese Culture Context

The Chinese social context presents unique cultural conditions that may influence attachment experiences among sexual minorities [27]. Traditional Chinese values emphasize filial piety, family continuity, collectivism, and social harmony [13,18]. Marriage and childbearing are commonly regarded as important social responsibilities, placing considerable pressure on sexual minority individuals to conform to heterosexual norms [13]. As a result, many lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in Mainland China experience conflicts between personal identity and family expectations [9,14]. Some individuals may conceal their sexual orientation, enter heterosexual marriages, or limit emotional disclosure to avoid social stigma [18,27]. These experiences may influence emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and attachment security. Existing Chinese LGBTQ studies suggest that identity concealment and family pressure are common experiences among sexual minorities in China [9,13]. Still, relatively few studies have directly examined how these cultural factors relate to attachment orientations. Consequently, a significant gap remains in understanding how Chinese cultural values shape attachment experiences among lesbian/bisexual women and gay/bisexual men [27].

4. Literature Review

4.1 Western Research on LGBTQ Attachment

Western scholarship has laid a foundational groundwork for understanding the relationship between attachment orientations and LGBTQ romantic relationships [4]. Early studies demonstrated that attachment processes among sexual minorities generally parallel those observed in heterosexual populations, although additional social stressors may contribute to higher levels of attachment insecurity [4,5]. Research conducted by Mohr and Jackson introduced the concept of same-sex romantic attachment and emphasized the importance of emotional security within same-sex relationships [4]. Their findings indicated that attachment insecurity among LGBTQ individuals was associated with lower relationship satisfaction and greater emotional distress [6]. Similarly, Sommantico and colleagues found that insecure attachment predicted poorer relationship quality among lesbian and gay couples [7]. Several studies further explored gender differences within sexual minority populations. Ridge and Feeney reported that lesbian participants demonstrated relatively higher anxious attachment, whereas gay male participants showed greater avoidant tendencies [5]. Research on romantic attachment among gay men similarly found elevated levels of emotional distancing and avoidant relational patterns [8]. Other studies examined the relationship between attachment orientations and mental health outcomes. Insecure attachment has been linked to depression, anxiety, relationship conflict, and lower self-esteem among LGBTQ individuals [6]. Porsch and colleagues further identified links between attachment insecurity and intimate partner conflict or violence within same-sex relationships [21]. Although Western research provides valuable theoretical foundations, its findings may not be fully generalizable to non-Western cultural settings [27]. Differences in social norms, family expectations, and cultural attitudes toward sexuality may shape attachment experiences differently across societies [10,15].

4.2 Attachment and Relationship Satisfaction

A substantial body of research has examined the association between attachment orientations and romantic relationship satisfaction [2]. Secure attachment is consistently linked to greater intimacy, emotional trust, and relational stability [3]. Individuals with secure attachment tend to communicate more effectively and maintain

healthier emotional regulation [2,3]. Conversely, anxious attachment is frequently associated with fear of abandonment, emotional dependency, and relationship instability [5]. Avoidant attachment is often linked to emotional withdrawal, discomfort with intimacy, and reduced relationship commitment [8]. These patterns have been observed in both heterosexual and sexual minority populations [4]. Research focusing on sexual minorities finds that attachment security may be particularly important in contexts marked by social stigma and discrimination [6,25]. Couperthwaite found that attachment security predicted relationship satisfaction across diverse sexual orientation groups [28]. Starks and Parsons similarly reported that insecure attachment among partnered gay men was associated with poorer relationship functioning and lower relationship satisfaction [8]. Attachment orientations have also been connected to sexual identity development [23]. Studies examining lesbian identity formation propose that attachment insecurity may affect emotional disclosure, identity integration, and fear of rejection [23]. Similarly, research comparing lesbian and non-lesbian female adolescents has identified differences in attachment patterns and their associations with coping strategies and life satisfaction [29]. Individuals with anxious attachment may be especially sensitive to social evaluation, whereas avoidantly attached individuals may be more likely to conceal their identities [22,23]. Overall, existing research indicates that attachment orientations play a significant role in shaping emotional experiences and romantic relationship outcomes among sexual minorities [6,25].

4.3 Minority Stress and Attachment Insecurity

Minority stress theory has become increasingly influential in explaining psychological and relational difficulties among LGBTQ individuals [16,24]. Scholars argue that chronic exposure to discrimination, rejection, and social stigma may undermine emotional security and interpersonal trust [6,25]. Studies examining daily heterosexist experiences among LGBTQ individuals have identified significant associations between minority stress and emotional distress [6]. Experiences such as discrimination, social exclusion, and identity concealment may heighten attachment anxiety and emotional insecurity [6,25]. Same-sex relationship studies have further demonstrated that minority stress can negatively affect relationship quality and emotional intimacy [25]. Rostosky and Riggle argued that external social pressures may disrupt trust and emotional closeness within same-sex partnerships [25]. More recent research by Frost and Meyer highlighted the continuing relevance of minority stress theory in understanding LGBTQ mental health and interpersonal functioning [30]. Systematic reviews conducted by Flentje and colleagues also found consistent associations between minority stress and negative psychological or biological outcomes [31]. Despite these key findings, relatively few studies have examined how minority stress influences attachment orientations specifically within Mainland Chinese populations [9]. Existing evidence nevertheless suggests that minority stress may be particularly salient in societies where sexual diversity remains less socially visible or accepted [25].

4.4 Chinese LGBTQ Research and Cultural Influences

Compared with Western countries, Chinese LGBTQ research remains relatively limited in both scope and theoretical depth [9,10]. Existing literature has focused primarily on public health, HIV prevention, and identity management among MSM populations [10,13]. Research on lesbian and bisexual women in Mainland China remains particularly scarce [14,15]. Studies examining Chinese lesbian identity development have highlighted tensions between personal identity and family expectations [9]. Scholars such as Cheng emphasized the dilemmas faced by Chinese lesbian youth navigating traditional family structures and heteronormative social expectations [9]. Other cultural studies suggest that Chinese sexual minorities frequently experience pressure related to marriage, filial obligation, and social conformity [13]. Tang and Ho both argued that Chinese LGBTQ individuals often navigate complex tensions between personal intimacy and collective family responsibilities [10,15]. Identity concealment has emerged as a particularly prominent issue within Chinese LGBTQ research [13,31]. Surveys conducted among Mainland Chinese LGBTQ populations found that many individuals concealed their sexual orientation from family members, colleagues, or social networks [13]. Research examining internalized heterosexism further suggested that shame and self-stigma may negatively impact emotional intimacy and psychological well-being [18]. In contrast, direct empirical research examining attachment orientations among Chinese lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations remains limited [27]. Available research rarely compares lesbian/bisexual women with gay/bisexual men, and few studies integrate attachment theory with Chinese cultural analysis [9,27]. Consequently, a substantial gap remains in understanding how attachment orientations operate within the sociocultural context of Mainland China [15].

5. Discussion & Synthesis

The present systematic review examined the available literature concerning attachment orientations among sexual minorities in Mainland China. Of the 32 core studies identified, none directly measured attachment orientations among sexual minorities in Mainland China using validated adult attachment scales. Most works consist of theoretical discussions, cultural analyses, or Western empirical studies. This research gap indicates a fundamental disconnect between cross-cultural attachment research and Chinese sexual minority studies. Nevertheless, several notable patterns emerged from the review. First, research on attachment among Chinese sexual minorities remains highly limited [9,10]. Existing work is heavily concentrated on public health and MSM populations, while lesbian and bisexual women remain significantly underrepresented. A possible reason for this imbalance is that female same-sex relationships hold lower visibility in Chinese public discourse, attracting less scholarly attention. Consequently, current theoretical understanding of gender differences in attachment orientations among Chinese sexual minorities remains largely speculative. Second, Chinese cultural factors appear closely relevant to attachment experiences [27]. The underlying mechanism may be that traditional values emphasizing filial piety, marriage, and family continuity create substantial identity-related pressure for sexual minority individuals [13]. Unlike Western contexts—where attachment insecurity often stems from dyadic relationship dynamics—in the Chinese context, such insecurity is amplified by familial and societal obligations [18]. It is plausible that these pressures contribute to emotional concealment and relationship conflict, though this pathway awaits empirical verification. Third, minority stress theory provides an important framework for understanding attachment insecurity among sexual minorities in China [16]. Existing studies indicate that stigma, discrimination, and identity concealment may negatively impact emotional security and relationship functioning [6,25]. In the Chinese context, these effects may be intensified by collectivist family expectations and limited social acceptance [10,13]. The theoretical implication is that minority stress may function not only as a direct stressor but also as a moderator of attachment system activation. However, no empirical study has directly tested this association, suggesting that the applicability of current theoretical frameworks to this cultural context remains underexplored.

At the same time, existing findings appear somewhat inconsistent across studies. Some studies reported relatively higher anxious attachment among lesbian participants, whereas others found no significant gender differences [5,7]. This inconsistency likely stems from methodological variations, such as differences in sample size, measurement instruments, cultural background, and recruitment strategies. One plausible interpretation is that current conclusions regarding gender differences lack cross-study consistency. Several methodological limitations should also be acknowledged. Many studies relied on small convenience samples and cross-sectional designs, limiting generalizability and causal inference. Furthermore, few studies examined bisexual populations as separate groups, despite evidence suggesting that bisexual individuals may experience distinct forms of minority stress [29]. These limitations arguably reflect that this field remains in the early stages of theoretical development rather than mere methodological oversights. Theoretically, future research should further investigate differences between lesbian/bisexual women and gay/bisexual men within Mainland China. Such research may advance attachment theory in two key ways: first, by extending the framework's explanatory power to sexual minority populations in non-Western settings; and second, by enabling the contextual expansion of attachment theory beyond Western samples to incorporate Chinese cultural contexts [15,27]. It is reasonable to argue that research in this area serves not merely to fill empirical gaps but also to test and potentially expand the theoretical boundaries of attachment theory itself.

6. Conclusion

This systematic review examined existing research concerning attachment orientations among sexual minorities in Mainland China, with particular attention to potential differences between lesbian/bisexual women and gay/bisexual men. The review identified 32 core studies, including theoretical works on attachment and minority stress, Western empirical studies on LGBTQ relationships, and cultural analyses of Chinese sexual minorities. The findings demonstrate that attachment insecurity among Chinese sexual minorities may be shaped by minority stress, identity concealment, family expectations, and broader cultural norms surrounding marriage and filial responsibility. Evidence from Western countries suggests potential gender differences in attachment orientations among sexual minorities, although these findings remain inconsistent and have not been systematically examined in Mainland China. Most importantly, the review reveals that research on attachment among Chinese sexual minorities remains underdeveloped. Studies focusing on lesbian

and bisexual women are particularly scarce, and few scholars have integrated attachment theory with Chinese cultural analysis. The present review contributes to the existing literature by synthesizing current findings and identifying key research gaps. Future studies should prioritize culturally informed and gender-inclusive research designs, expand inquiry beyond MSM populations, and further explore the relationships among attachment, minority stress, and interpersonal functioning within Mainland China. Overall, the findings highlight the need to reconceptualize attachment processes among non-Western sexual minority populations, where cultural expectations and minority stress processes jointly shape relational security and emotional development.

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Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

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