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# Women's Revenge in Sexual Behavior? An Interpretation About "The Fourth Love" in Chinese Youth Culture From the Perspective of Gender Performativity

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## ABSTRACT

In the current era of exploring changing sexual behavior, promoting and supporting the diversity of pleasure, the sexual health and rights of sexual minorities are getting more public attention, among which the "Fourth Love" emerges as a distinctive group within the framework of Chinese culture. Fourth Love refers to a loving relationship between couples of the opposite sex where the woman assumes the traditional male gender role and the man assumes the traditional female gender role, and always accompanied by a special pattern of sexual behavior that women penetrate the men's anus using their fingers or a device. This theoretical article begins by introducing and discussing the historical background, core concept "Fourth Love" and its related categories. Subsequently, we start from Judith Butler's gender performativity theory and interpret the Fourth Love from the perspective of "de-naturalization" and argue that the gender performativity theory provides a reasonable explanation for the gender characteristics (female top and male bottom) of the Fourth Love. Finally, we posit a discussion and outlook on the survival and development of the Fourth Love in the fields of sexual health, sexual pleasure, sexual right, and family and marriage, and calls for more understanding and psychological support from the society for them.

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## Introduction

Sexuality is fluid and diverse, experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships (Ford et al., 2021). Recently, there has been a significant shift in attitudes toward sex, with increased tolerance and openness to various sexual practices and activities (Chen, 2017; Yu et al., 2022). An increasing number of researchers are focusing on sexual health, which is associated with sexual practices, sexual rights, and sexual pleasure. (Ford et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2015; Sladden et al., 2021). The concept of sexual health, developed at a 1975 World Health Organization (WHO) conference, is now regarded as a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality (World Association for Sexual Health [WAS],

2021). International research consistently shows that sexuality and sexual relations are central to sexual health (Kismödi et al., 2017). Sexual health necessitates a positive and respectful attitude toward both, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences free of coercion, discrimination and violence (Ford et al., 2021). To attain and maintain sexual health, the sexual rights of all individuals, including women and sexual minorities, must be respected, protected, and fulfilled (Lottes, 2013). In this international context, previously sensitive or marginalized sexual minorities, including homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender identities, have entered view of Chinese public (Liu et al., 2020). A noteworthy subgroup among them, called the "Fourth Love," are also increasingly active (Chen, 2012; Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023).

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Fourth Love refers to a loving relationship between couples of the opposite sex where the woman assumes the traditional male gender role and the man assumes the traditional female gender role (Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023). Simply put, in the fourth love couple, the woman is the “husband,” and the man is the “wife.” Particularly in China, the Fourth Love phenomenon challenges traditional norms and expands the sexual repertoire beyond conventional heterosexual relationships, encouraging a female-dominated view of sex (Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023). It represents an attempt by women, who have historically been regarded as a vulnerable group in China, to explore changes in their sexual practices. Additionally, it highlights women’s rights to express themselves freely, including sexual health, and sexual pleasure.

#### ***The socio-cultural context of the fourth love: a historical review of Chinese patriarchal culture and the feminist movement***

Sex analysis cannot be separated from its particular socio-cultural context (Cox et al., 2024; Ford et al., 2021; Navarro et al., 2019). Fang et al. (2012) discerns Fourth Love as a phenomenon of gender pluralism within the contemporary youth culture of China. The younger generation has reshaped, through interaction, reflection and criticism, the conventional “female top-male bottom” relationship paradigm, and has expansively redefined it as the “Fourth Love.” This conceptual framework strives for the pursuit of “gender equality” while concurrently accentuating the intrinsic value and significance of affection (Fang et al., 2012).

We think that the reversal of sexual power brought about by the fourth love is an impact on the traditional Chinese patriarchal system and is a manifestation of the contemporary feminist movement. Traditional Chinese society was constituted by an essentially masculine value system developed over thousands of years (Leung, 2003; Liu, 2024). The combination of hierarchical values and patriarchal domination, as espoused by Confucianism, resulted in the subjugation of women. One of the most typical methods of control is to create an ideological system that maintains a hierarchy, such as filial piety and the Three Obediences and Four Virtues. These

dictated that women were to remain subservient: obeying their father and brothers before marriage, their husband upon marriage, and their adult sons in widowhood (Leung, 2003; Zhang, 2022). Accordingly, women have been treated as subordinates to their fathers, male elders, husbands, and sons and had no rights of their own. This patriarchal system had a profound influence on the sexual issues, which were considered morally taboo, and the identity of women in society and family (Liu, 2024; Xiao et al., 2011). A Chinese woman’s identity was defined in terms of her unquestioning obedience and deference to the authority of her husband’s household at marriage and her eternal attachment to it (Leung, 2003). Throughout China’s extended feudal history, women were denied autonomy over their fates, and were continuously domesticated by patriarchy.

With the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the end of traditional China, China began to embark on the trajectory of modernization. Concurrently, Western feminist ideologies permeated China, prompting an increasing number of women to venture beyond their homes and enter schools for education, which cause many young Chinese women to become feminists and pursue their purpose, driven by the objective of attaining and safeguarding gender equality while challenging gender discrimination and antiquated traditional norms (Leung, 2003; Mo). Following pivotal historical periods such as the May Fourth Movement, the establishment of New China, and the era of reform and opening up, China’s feminist movement entered a new phase in the 21st century (Liu et al., 2020). New-generation feminists were more willing to deal with disputes and question the status quo, compared to feminists of an earlier generation (Wang, 2018). More importantly, they actively chose to amplify their voices on the Internet independently, asserting their autonomy, and have insisted on staying outside the system of the Women’s Federation. They actively use the Internet to seek positive and empowering images for women, constructing their own stories. Taken together, Internet access has brought vast social changes, the feminist movement is on the rise. They pursue and enjoy a diverse sexual life, and promote fulfillment of human rights related to sexuality and sexual

pleasure. Chinese society is undergoing a sexual revolution in areas such as sexual health, rights and pleasure (Suiming, 2007).

### ***A brief view of gender performativity theory***

In the 1990s, Judith Butler's gender theory ignited a fervor within the academic community of gender studies, provocatively challenging traditional notions of gender and exerting a transformative influence on established gender and feminist theories. According to Butler, the gender subject is not inherently "prediscursive"; instead, subjects and identities are actively constructed through a continuous process of enactment (Boucher, 2006). Simultaneously, Butler argues that performance is far from a passive acceptance of cultural influences; rather, it embodies an *opening* and *difference*. The deliberate manipulation of gender, inverting its traditional norms, provides the space for the existence of "abnormal" gender identities among sexual minorities, diverging from the confines of conventional heterosexual norms. Ultimately, Butler's groundbreaking theory of gender performativity has become synonymous with her name and finds extensive application in the examination of sexual minorities, including women (who, despite being a numerical majority, exhibit minority characteristics within a gender hierarchy) and the LGBT community (Awinpoka Akurugu, 2021; Blumenfeld & Breen, 2017; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021; Raja, 2018).

### ***The current study***

Although the research on sexual minorities has been very rich, the "fourth love" group emerging within Chinese youth culture, needs to receive more recognition and attention (Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023). Through the exploration and discussion of the fourth love group, this article aspires to offer a new perspective on sexual health research and explore more possibilities of changing sexual practices. It aims to foster the harmonious coexistence of diverse genders and create an environment in which more sexual minorities can freely express themselves and flourish within the prevailing trend of gender pluralism. In short,

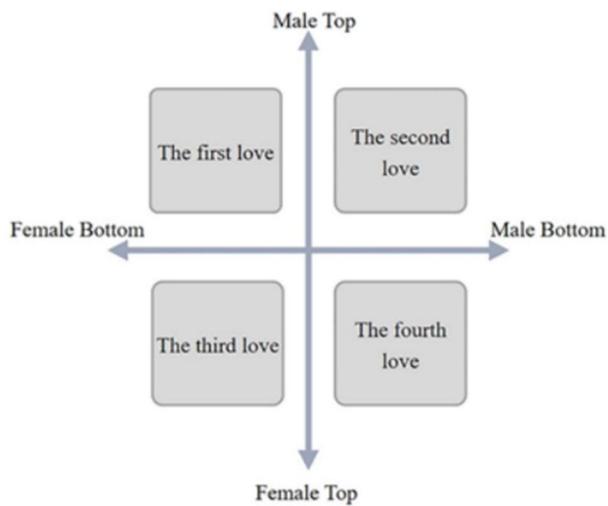
the fourth love shows women's dominance and control of sex (both in sexual relations and activity), highlighting diverse sexual activities. In light of this research void, the aim of this theoretical article is as follows: (1) We introduce the historical background, relevant concepts and categories of the fourth love in detail, aiming to promote the public's understanding of this group. (2) We have a theoretical interpretation of the interactive pattern of the fourth love (especially sexual behavior) through Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. (3) We discuss the value of fourth love to current research on sexual health, sexual rights, and sexual pleasure. (4) We put forward some prospects and call for more scholars to pay attention to this group.

## **Related literature review of the Fourth Love**

### ***The concept of the Fourth Love***

The predecessor of the "Fourth Love" is the "female top-male bottom," developed from a specific background. The term "top" and "bottom" are imports influenced by Japanese boy love manga culture (McLelland et al., 2015). "Top" refers to the stronger and assertive partner in a romantic relationship, manifesting more overtly masculine characteristics. Conversely, "bottom" refers to the weaker and passive partner in love, exhibiting more overtly feminine or neutral traits (Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023). Regarding sexuality, the top-bottom dynamic also signifies the relationship between the penetrating and the penetrated. In delineating the concept, the fourth love distinguishes itself from the first love (traditional heterosexuality: male top and female bottom), the second love (gay: male top and male bottom), and the third love (lesbian: female top and female bottom) (Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023, see Figure 1). This delineation reflects the evolving landscape of gender and intercourse characteristics within diverse gender expressions.

Presently, there is not much research on fourth love within academia (Chen, 2012; Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023). Chen (2012) draws a distinction between fourth love in a narrow sense and in a broad sense: Fourth Love in the narrow sense refers to a mode of sexual intercourse wherein



**Figure 1.** Four types of love according to individual gender and intercourse.

the women penetrate the men's anus using their fingers or a device. Broadly speaking, Fourth Love refers to a pattern of gender affection where the woman is strong, and the man is weak. Professor Fang et al. (2012) further encapsulates this as a female-active, male-passive mode of intercourse. This innovative pattern challenges traditional gender roles and holds positive implications for the evolution of sexual and gender pluralism.

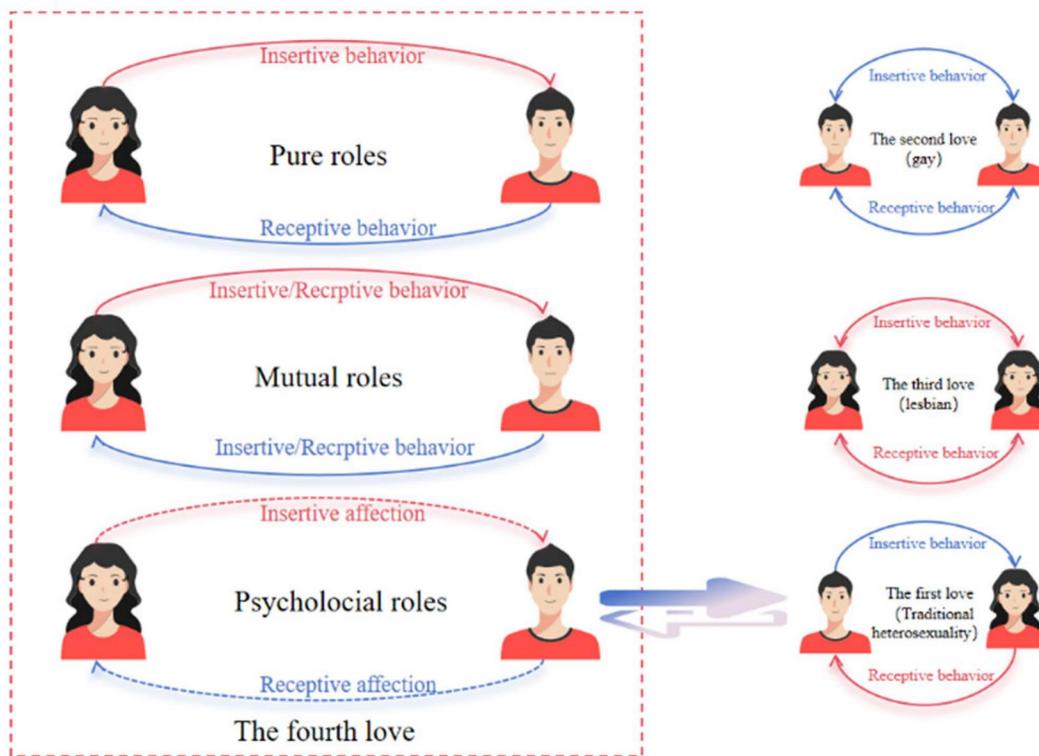
In the realm of international discourse, the concept of a direct counterpart to the fourth love is currently lacking. Consequently, the term "the Fourth Love" is directly translated into English in the academic research. Alternatively, English terms such as "gender reversal" and "role reversal relationship" are employed, offering a somewhat more descriptive approach that underscores the inversion of traditional gender dynamics (Faustino, 2020). In Western cultural contexts, expressions like "pegging" (a sexual act involving women anally penetrating a man with a strap-on dildo or vibrator) and "anal sex" (a form of sexual activity wherein heterosexual individuals derive pleasure by stimulating the male anus) also convey the underlying essence of fourth love from a behavioral standpoint (Branfman et al., 2018). In addition, in recent years, words such as "femboy," have also appeared frequently in online social networking, and these expressions show the characteristics of the fourth love to a certain extent. McCormack (2018) extensively explores

the diversification of heterosexuality as an orientation and identity, particularly within youth culture, emphasizing the necessity for novel frameworks to comprehend heterosexuality and sexual diversity in a broader behavioral spectrum.

### **The roles of the fourth love**

The present membership of the Fourth-Love community is broadly categorized into three roles: purely insertive and purely receptive roles, mutually insertive and mutually receptive roles and psychologically insertive and psychologically receptive roles (Chen, 2012). Specifically, (a) Pure roles can only accept one mode of sexual behavior: a woman penetrates a man with dildos, sex toys or fingers. Meanwhile, they can't accept the sexual behavior of the first love, which means a man penetrates them with any ways. (b) Mutual roles can accept both the two ways to have a sex, which means both pegging and first-love sex are allowed. (c) Psychological roles means that he or she can only accept this type of interaction on a psychological level, not sexual behavior (Chen, 2012). Simply speaking, psychological insertion and psychological reception represent a combination of the fourth-love affection and the first-love sexual behavior (see Figure 2). Overall, the role differentiation of fourth-love is established on opposition of fourth-love sex and first-love sex, depending on whether the individual accepts these two sexual behaviors, and in any case, it's all built on "female top-male bottom."

As previous study has shown (Campbell et al., 1986), the smaller the network range, the less tolerance for diversity. With the continuous spread of the term "the fourth love," its interpretation remains controversial. It's a messy "Pandora's box" where the internal definition of fourth love is always in flux. In other words, there is a debate about who gets in and who gets out. The purely insertive and purely receptive roles were initially recognized by the Fourth-love individuals. Mutually insertive and mutually receptive are now also acknowledged, with the promotion of modern egalitarianism. The primary contention lies in whether psychological characters belong to the fourth-love group. Some argue that despite women playing the role of caregiver and men the



**Figure 2.** Three roles of the fourth love according to the interaction between partners.

role of the cared for in everyday life, their sexual behavior does not differ significantly from traditional heterosexual, where the man typically penetrates the woman. Advocates of psychological roles emphasize the importance of being together over the specific mode of lovemaking, even citing “*Platonic love*”—a view of love seeking psychological and spiritual purity—as evidence that focusing on the mode of sexual behavior is meaningless for love. However, opponents contend that if the men still penetrate the women, it essentially replicates traditional dynamics and holds no substantial difference from the first love, where women also exert significant influence. If men are merely taken care of by women in daily lives (Men are more docile in relationships, while women are more dominant), then it resembles what is commonly referred to as “*cradle-snatcher love*,” and there is no need to separate the fourth love from the first love.

#### **Fourth Love’s pegging and other sexual minorities**

In China, sexual minorities are primarily categorized into the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities, collectively known as the

GLBT (Lin, Zhou, Tian, et al., 2023). The key distinction between Fourth Love and the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community lies in sexual orientation, because Fourth Love is also still in the realm of heterosexuality. In contrast to transgender individuals, because we used to classify gender from a biological perspective, so gender expression that is inconsistent with the sex is classified as gender role alienation or even gender adjustment disorder (Crocq, 2021). As a result, the gender flip model of fourth love easily confuses it with transgender people. However, despite potential confusion, there are notable differences between Fourth Love and transgender people, and a direct equivalence cannot be drawn between the Fourth Love and the transgender. Transgender individuals are those whose gender identity or expression does not align with their assigned biological sex at birth and societal expectations, and who aspire to live as the opposite sex (Bailey et al., 2014). From a medical or psychological perspective, transgender individuals may experience conditions such as gender dysphoria and transsexualism, reflecting their discomfort and distress regarding the incongruence between their gender identity and biological sex

(Briggs et al., 2018). Some may even desire to alter their biological anatomy through medication or surgery to align with the gender they identify with (De Sutter, 2001; Kuper et al., 2012). Public attention tends to center on negative mental health issues within the transgender community, including sexual risk, discrimination, stigma, prejudice, and internalized homophobia (Gómez-Guadix & Incera, 2021; Mendoza-Perez & Ortiz-Hernandez, 2021; Plöderl & Tremblay, 2015). In contrast, Fourth Love is primarily concerned with reversing traditional gender roles within relationships (Almost limited to intimate relationships), with an emphasis on identifying with one's biological sex rather than rejecting it. Importantly, the Fourth-love individuals generally do not experience severe gender dysphoria, and they simply enjoy playing the role of the opposite gender in traditional heterosexual relationships.

Undoubtedly, the concept of “the fourth love” is unique to China (Chen, 2012). However, we believe that the reversal of the relationship dynamics between genders is prevalent in various countries and cultures. Simply speaking, the fourth love comprises two essential components that distinguish it from the first love, distinctive sexual behaviors and the reversed relationship pattern, making it a form of sexual minority activity. Regarding the sexual behavior underlying it, *pegging*, is universal. To date, despite Western researchers beginning to pay attention to this phenomenon, existing articles predominantly focalize on the sexual aspect of pegging (Aguilar, 2017; Stewart, 2018; Williams et al., 2023). It is crucial to note that the fourth love extends beyond pegging, it encompasses broader aspects such as the reversal of gender roles in daily life. The fourth love represents more of a rebellion against traditional gender roles and expectations of gender equality, emotion and lifestyle of “female top-male bottom” is considered more important than pegging (Chen, 2012). After all, pegging is just a behavior. It can be a one-time exploration or even a pleasurable leisure activity (Williams et al., 2023). It can be used by anyone, not just cisgender heterosexual individuals (Williams & Coto, 2023). Consequently, the fourth love distinguishes itself from conventional relationships and forms a distinctive circle, as it

encompasses not only a unique sexual practice but also a stable and pervasive reversed relationship pattern that extends beyond the realm of sexuality into broader aspects of life.

### ***The social relation and circle of the Fourth Love***

The term “circle” is commonly employed in the context of sexual minorities. In the realm of homosexuality, for example, a “gay circle” refers to a social network of individuals actively engaged in gay context (Luo, 2022). Similarly, the Fourth Love community, as a sexual minority, leverages the anonymity of the internet to connect and communicate through social media platforms (Pingel et al., 2013). Presently, the online meeting places for the Fourth Love group in China predominantly revolve around social media platforms such as microblogs, post bars, Douban, and Fourth-Love software, with the “Fourth-Love Bar” being the most central. This bar boasts a follower count surpassing 350,000 and an accumulated post count of 20 million. Initially, the “Fourth-Love Bar” emerged from a “female top and male bottom” bar. However, due to poor management and disorder within this bar, it was eventually banned. Consequently, “蘑菇”(Mo gu) and “白夜未央”(Baiye weiyang) (Two Internet nicknames) founded the “Fourth-Love Bar” in 2009, and the term “Fourth Love” has since persisted as a generic descriptor for this group (Chen, 2012).

As a nascent social circle, Fourth Love has provided a newfound sense of belonging and refuge for many “wanderers” seeking connection (Chen, 2012). The current character of the Fourth Love circle is marked by diversity and contradiction. Diversity is evident in the freedom from traditional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, allowing for varied temperaments and gender roles among men and women. Paradoxically, while the Fourth Love community has not yet reached a consensus on issues such as “concepts” and “roles,” it acknowledges its connections with other sexual minorities. However, it also tends to remain insular and resistant to external influence. Many Fourth-Love groups and platforms employ strict entry questions, requiring applicants to demonstrate an understanding of

“the fourth love” before gaining access. Gender identity is a necessary condition for social interaction” (Fox & Warber, 2015), and Fourth-Love members show reluctance to be influenced by the outside world, even hate other sexual minorities such as homosexuals to join in their exclusive circle. Thus, there are certain restrictions on ordinary people who “taste new things” to join in their circle. In this regard, the social circle of the Fourth Love group appears more closed and exclusive compared to the gay.

### **The Fourth Love in the perspective of gender performativity**

Delving into the realm of Fourth Love broadens our understanding of gender pluralism and unveils the immense possibilities and vibrancy inherent in human sexuality. We posit that a profound interpretation of the Fourth-Love group can be unearthed through the gender performativity theories pioneered by Judith Butler, a trailblazer in the field of postmodern feminism.

#### ***Fourth love: the possibility of being***

In the course of gender research on sexual minorities, essentialism and constructivism have always been two paradigms that have been debated (Hegarty, 2020). In recent years, the perspective of social constructivism has gradually gained upper hand. Judith Butler’s gender performance theory, rooted in the constructivist viewpoint, has been instrumental in shaping this shift. Butler rejects the idea that gender duality is constructed in a pre-cultural “prediscursive” domain. Drawing inspiration from Althusser’s “interpellation” and Derrida’s “recitation,” she contends that the construction of biological gender in this pre-cultural space serves the purpose of mastering the subject’s desires. The intricacy of this construction lies in presenting biological gender as unconstructed, thus rendering the binary separation of biological gender logically sound. This process effectively reverses the cause-and-effect relationship within gender discourse. According to Butler, neither biological nor social gender constitutes a “natural fact” but rather a “cultural performance.” Social gender, in this

framework, does not follow the traditional trajectory dictated by biological sex; both are continuously shaped in the ongoing processes of cultural formation. Moreover, Butler fundamentally challenges the idea of biological sex exerting control over an individual’s gender practices and rejects the interpretation of social sex influencing biological sex at the cultural level (Butler, 1990).

Having deconstructed the essence of biological sex, Butler proceeds to assert that gender identity is acquired through performativity, which encompasses three dimensions: linguistic, theatrical, and ritualistic. First, within the linguistic dimension, influenced by Austin’s *performative utterance*, Butler argues that gender is embedded in and expressed through the words of a speech act—a dynamic language capable of producing results and effects. Subjects can articulate or generate socio-cultural meanings in diverse ways. Consequently, there exists no a preexisting gender identity that can measure behavior and belonging. Within this framework, Fourth-Love individuals, akin to traditional heterosexuals or other sexual minorities, can construct an exclusive gender identity through language within the realm of interaction. This identity is not static but fluid, capable of flowing, shifting, and even dissipating within another field. Second, in the theatrical dimension, gender formation is not only shaped by language but also influenced by the interpretation of various actions. Butler posits that there is no preexisting, intentional subject preceding the act of manipulation, and actors belong to a fluid and evolving category. Thus, the emergence of a Fourth-Love group is not the result of the existence of a group of men and women who are averse to traditional heterosexuality and who, through constant imitation, create unique sexual minority pattern for themselves. Instead, it is a collective of individuals exhibiting Fourth-Love characteristics, forming a Fourth-Love circle through actions, expressions, mutual identification, and support on the fringes of mainstream sexual culture.

Finally, in addressing the questions surrounding “performance” and “performativity,” Butler elucidates the ritualistic dimension of performativity theory. In the process of being interpellated upon at an early stage, they not only learn about

their gender but also discern a set of rules that govern their gender. Consequently, in a ritually defined situation, individuals actively immerse themselves in the field of “performance.” The formation of gender identity is thus not an act that one can arbitrarily choose or control but rather the outcome of a continuous, obligatory performance. This underscores why “performativity,” rather than “performance,” is used—a term signifying a time-consuming process needed to solidify and stabilize the effectiveness of rights as intrinsic prescriptions. Based on this, like other sexual minorities, the Fourth-Love group has perversion and reversals in the process of performativity, and the unique sexual behavior, attitude and identity shown by this perverted performativity that does not conform to traditional heterosexual norms are relatively stable, and will not be changed easily.

#### ***Fourth Love: fission in performativity***

Gender is an assignment that occurs more than once in a person’s life. The individual is assigned a gender at birth and then a set of expectations following that continue to assign gender to the individual (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Under this theoretical construct, each individual is subliminally influenced by society and culture to take a gender *script* and perform it, with women playing women and men playing men, although of course, this performance is not arbitrary and instantaneous, but rather a compulsory repetition of gender norms. These repetitions of norms are influenced by the rules of practice and discourse that continue to shape the gendered body and thus give gender a temporary solidity. Thus, there is no ontological identity of gender behind the expression of gender, which is formed in the ongoing act of performativity (Butler, 1990). This deconstructs the certainty of the identity of the gendered subject and gives it the possibility of fluidity. In summary, it is easy to see that Butler’s view of gender identity as the result of ongoing enactment, rather than determined by an antecedent norm, provides the conditions and practical impetus for the construction of gender beyond the binary division of the Fourth Love.

Butler’s exploration of homosexuality provides valuable insights into the modes of interaction within Fourth Love (Butler, 2011). While Fourth Love also involves “male and female” roles, it diverges from replicating traditional heterosexual contexts. Instead, it extends these contexts to unveil the complexity of numerous possibilities within sexual identity. In Fourth-Love relationships, men and women displace gender scripts, subverting the standard discursive rules inherent in traditional heterosexual norms, and actively performing each other’s gender identities. Butler treats sexual minorities as parody of the body field, in which Fourth Love, like homosexuality, becomes a temporary combination of gender and body. This parody is Butler’s understanding of the unconventional form of gender performativity. Importantly, she contends that there is no inherent distinction between aberrant and normal gender practices—they both reference the same system of social norms. Traditional heterosexuality, therefore, is not positioned as “the origin.” Consequently, both Fourth Love and homosexuality, gain true parity with traditional heterosexuality in the sense of performativity. In this way, whether it is the fourth love or homosexuality, they all gain true parity with traditional heterosexuality in the sense of rehearsal. In other words, the traditional binary division of normative behavior and anti-normative behavior is also contrary to reality, and gender norms will classify anti-conventional performance behaviors into the category of domination and oppression, and thus be regarded as heterogeneous.

The presence of the Fourth Love in society, marked by its distinctive characteristics, has disrupted and deconstructed traditional concepts of gender. First, the Fourth Love demonstrates that gender is intricate and does not always evolve solely based on biological sex. There exists neither a straightforward equivalence nor a necessary causal relationship between the two, and gender can adopt new attributes through performativity. Second, the Fourth Love highlights that there are no preexisting gendered subjects; rather, subjects are constructed through the enactment of gender. By enacting gender norms

in other gendered subjects, they subvert established gender norms. Finally, Fourth Love, with its diverse sexual identities, challenges gender relations within the traditional heterosexual system, revealing that heterosexuality, in the traditional sense, is a social construct rather than a natural phenomenon.

In essence, Butler diverges from the idea of the gendered subject shaping gender, completely deconstructing the sex/gender binary (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021). This elucidates the existence of Fourth Love as a mode of gender interaction. Beyond identification with biological sex, gender can evolve outside traditional logic. Gender identity has produced a new fission in the “difference” and “opening” of the performativity, which makes the existence of feminine men and masculine women have a new possibility. Regarding its characteristics, Fourth Love reflects both the reflection of gender culture in traditional Chinese society and the contemporary exploration of gender relations in Chinese youth groups under the influence of gender pluralism. In terms of its structure, the Fourth Love has emerged as an antithesis to traditional heterosexuality. The group’s gender performativity also embodies the tension between “active performativity” and “passive performativity.” On one hand, the Fourth Love circle establishes strict standards and boundaries, contradicting the aim of eliminating gender stereotypes and making the group susceptible to labels. On the other hand, the Fourth Love have the means and opportunities to redefine themselves, retaining the freedom to act independently. They construct their gender dynamically, free from the constraints and controls of their biological sex.

#### ***Fourth love: the struggle for “power”***

Michel Foucault argues that sex, whether masculinity or femininity, has evolved over history and is a product of heteronormative hegemony, shaped by sexual and gender practices (Foucault, 1978). “Gender” itself is a fictitious category, a product of a particular form of power. Traditional heteronormative rules confine us within a hegemonic cultural discourse. This

hegemony of heteronormativity treats homosexual desire as an aberration outside the established norms. Drawing upon Foucault’s ideas, Butler discerns the mechanisms through which power operates between sex and gender. She argues that there exists a heterosexual matrix comprising sex, gender, and sexual orientation (Butler, 1990; Maclaran, 2017). The process of gendering involves the coherent amalgamation of these three elements to construct a complete gendered subject. The robust and coercive interplay between these three components renders the heterosexual framework of norms even more unquestionable. Addressing the relationship between sex and gender, as discussed earlier, Butler contends that gender is not merely a conceptual or cultural extension of sex. Instead, it is an ongoing discursive practice constructed around the concept of heterosexuality as the norm for human relations. Within this framework, traditional heterosexual norms are enforced against homosexuality and other sexual minorities. This subordination of gender to sex creates a false congruence between the two, solidifying the heterosexual matrix.

If enforced conformity between sex and gender maintains heterosexual gender norms, sexual orientation—the “third party” in the matrix—pushes the gender binary toward more radical extremes of “femininity” and “masculinity.” Within this hegemonic discourse, the mechanism of power prescribes the heterosexualization of sexuality, adhering to the binary law of men desiring women and women desiring men. In fact, it is not only sexual desire itself that is restricted; specifically, men can only project their sexuality onto female individuals with feminine qualities such as gentleness, virtue and silence, while women can only project their sexuality onto male individuals with masculine qualities such as bravery, rationality and leadership. In this way, heterosexuality appears to be the result of an individual’s choice after self-identifying with gender. However, an analysis and comparison of same-sex desires reveal heterosexuality as a prerequisite and cause for the establishment of gender identity. The emergence of Fourth Love

challenges this narrative by demonstrating that it is possible to break down gender identities within the heteronormative system. Therefore, the same inverse causality cannot be applied to construct the traditional heteronormative “male top and female bottom.” Unconventional gender identities like Fourth Love, while marginalized from mainstream sexual culture, simultaneously challenge the authority of traditional heterosexuality by their very existence. When analyzed through the lens of the heteronormative matrix, the Fourth Love group is no different from traditional heterosexuality in terms of sex and sexual orientation. However, in terms of gender, it embodies a new characteristic of inverted masculine and feminine temperament. If we use the triangle of the heterosexual matrix to reconceptualize Fourth Love, then the love relationship between one partner whose sex is male, gender is female, and sexual orientation is female, and the other partner whose sex is female, gender is male, and sexual orientation is male, can be described as Fourth Love. Of course, this description is simple and rough, because of the complexity of social gender, in defining the fourth love, sexual behavior, sexual attitudes, sexual preferences and other aspects must also be considered.

If the debate between homosexuality and heterosexuality has led scholars to consider the nature of “natural” attributes, the emergence of the fourth love has undoubtedly initiated the disintegration of power systems within heterosexuality. Throughout the history of Western feminism, it is not difficult to see that masculinist discourse has been a cage that feminists have had to break through. Gender play, as a tactical language for women’s political struggle, is motivated by the movement of women’s disliked and excluded bodies, in which the desire to be denied becomes the fundamental driving force of “play,” constituting the “revenge” of the women body (Aguilar, 2017). The emergence of the fourth love group in the context of “female top and male bottom” is a subconscious subversion and denial of traditional patriarchy. Women take pleasure in “playing hegemonic masculinity script” and emphasize what they perceive as a “power reversal” of the sexes, attempting to dismantle male hegemony through a pluralistic discourse, and think of it as

“patriarchy-shattering.” (As Butler proposed the “*lesbian phallus*”). From the perspective of gender performativity, it is evident that when individuals consciously oppose traditional heterosexual norms, their gender becomes inconsistent. Even within heterosexual discourses, two distinct outcomes may emerge: the traditional heterosexual woman and the Fourth-Love woman. Of course, what is also worth considering is that in order to fit into Fourth Love, men seem to play the traditional women and women play the traditional men, and sex itself is performed, as if it replicates the oppressive logic of masculinity in its repetition. As Fang (2012) argues, if the “female top and male bottom” patterns merely mimics traditional heterosexuality and homosexuality, the power relations involved are not eliminated; they are merely conditionally shifted. This shift, though inverse to established power relations, does not completely counteract their negative effects. Therefore, there is a commitment within the Fourth Love community to democratize gender relations and work toward eliminating gender power differentials, rather than engaging in a mere struggle for power that perpetuates hierarchical structures (McCormack, 2018).

## Discussion

Traditional gender roles, in terms of sexuality, act as guides to human behavior. Women have long been expected to maintain an attractive physical appearance, remain soft-spoken in communication, and be passive, compliant, and obedient to their partners during sexual activity (Farvid & Saing, 2022; Muhamad et al., 2016). However, this article introduces a new sexual group, Fourth Love, which highlights the dominance of women’s sexual status and the pursuit of diverse sexual pleasure. This exploration of changing sexual practices breaks the shackles of tradition and will be of great value to sexual health research worldwide.

### *Fourth love and sexual health*

There is an international consensus that sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and relationships, as well as the possibility of enjoyable and safe sexual experiences

free from coercion, discrimination, and violence (Ford et al., 2021). Fourth Love represents the exploration and interpretation of sexual health by a new generation of young people within the context of Chinese culture. They reject the constraints of traditional male and female identity roles in heterosexual relationships, thereby expanding sexual possibilities. In this healthy sexual relationship, the Fourth Love group takes charge of their own sexual rights and experiences pleasure distinct from traditional heterosexuality, providing a valuable subject for international sexual health research.

Of course, behind this quest for gender freedom of expression, two aspects remain noteworthy. On the one hand, the worldwide stigma and shame surrounding sexuality, sexual desire, and pleasure still exist (Gruskin et al., 2019), which can seriously impede sexual health (Becasen et al., 2015). We should create an inclusive and understanding social environment that supports and affirms everyone's sexual rights. On the other hand, due to the unique sexual behavior patterns of Fourth Love, it is necessary to pay attention to potential risks. Sexual intercourse involving the insertion of a strap-on dildo or vibrator through the anal sphincter into the partner's rectum may present a new way to transmit sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection. Especially in this context, where most participants in Fourth Love are young people (Chen, 2012; Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023), it is crucial to develop educational and public health strategies to reduce risky sexual behaviors, particularly among adolescents (Giambi, 2002).

#### ***Fourth love and sexual rights***

There is no doubt that, people's experience of sex is not only tied to their sexual health but dependent on the extent to which their sexual rights are respected, protected and fulfilled (Gruskin et al., 2019). Many studies have shown that, compared to men, women are much more likely to have their sexual rights violated (Laan et al, 2021; Reis et al, 2021). However, the fourth love can be seen as an important symbol of women's pursuit of sexual rights, because sexual rights protect all

people's rights to fulfill and express their sexuality and enjoy sexual health (Miller et al., 2015).

In light of this view, we cannot ignore the sexual rights campaigns that sexual minorities (e.g., the fourth love) bring with them. Presently, Chinese laws lack explicit provisions to guarantee the rights of sexual minorities and mainly based on "biological sex" to interpret and regulate gender. At the same time, gender norms of masculinity and femininity give different status and power to the two sexes, and the emergence of the fourth love is a challenge to this tradition and taboo (Rice et al., 2021) and to the privileged and political status of traditional men (Bransman & Ekberg Stiritz, 2012). In the future, the Fourth Love group, like the GLBT group, may speak out for the rights of sexual minorities and actively promote the movement to protect the rights of sexual minorities. We should therefore take a more pluralistic and inclusive approach to the challenge that sexual minorities pose to our current human rights culture.

#### ***Fourth love and sexual pleasure***

Pleasure is a fundamental reason why people have sex and sexual pleasure has been described as the enjoyment derived from sexual interaction (Reis et al., 2021). According to the WAS declaration, the meaning of sexual pleasure is complex, multifaceted, and diverse. That is, feelings around sexual pleasure are subjective, socially-constructed and may include diverse sexual activities (Coleman et al., 2021; Ford et al, 2021; Reis et al, 2021). In Fourth love, women play traditionally male roles and achieve a reversal of female dominance in sexual behavior and relationships. They derive pleasure from mentally and physically penetrating men, which reflects the complexity and diversity of contemporary youth's pursuit of sexual pleasure.

Specifically, the sexual pleasure experienced within Fourth Love relationships seems to be multiple. Firstly, fourth-love men can get prostate stimulation during anal sex. The difference with the traditional heterosexual position will bring physiological pleasure to the fourth love. Secondly, the "female up-male down" sex model can ignite women's desire for conquest,

facilitating the pursuit of sexual power and satisfying, so as to meet the psychological sexual pleasure. Most significantly, historically, fourth-love men may face stigma associated with homosexuality due to their enjoyment of anal stimulation, while fourth-love women challenge the idealized image of women in patriarchal societies. This combination brings a touch of taboo sexual pleasure to the fourth love on the basis of physical and psychological pleasure. Taken together, this comprehensive enjoyment of sexual pleasure reflects the contemporary young people's questioning and rejection of feudal bondage, and their free pursuit of sexual health and sexual rights.

### Summary and future prospects

This article has provided a theoretical analysis and interpretation of the Fourth love using Butler's gender performativity theory. In real life, the fourth love group as a sexual minority deserves further consideration and discussion.

First, in the field of marriage and family education, it is essential to consider the implications of the current Chinese marriage law, which allows Fourth-love people to legally marry, establish families and raise offspring (This is despite the fact that Chinses mainland has no marriage law about homosexuality). The question of whether this reversal of gender relations will lead to marital and family conflicts, or threat "family values" (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018), needs to be further traced and explored. Additionally, a significant concern arises regarding the potential impact of this relationship pattern on the formation and development of children's gender roles. Abnormal gender roles in children could potentially result in lower peer acceptance and, in the long term, contribute to issues such as disorders in sexual orientation (Van Beijsterveldt et al., 2006). By focusing on the fourth love group, we hope to open up new avenues for research into traditional marriage and family patterns, and to encourage a rethinking and restructuring of the current ethical and social institutions of marriage and family.

Second, as discussed earlier, stigma and discrimination are still barriers to sexual health and rights in today's society, we should give more

attention and regulation to the "fourth love group." On the one hand, as Butler argues, resisting the violence imposed on us by idealized gender norms is a top priority, especially for people of nontraditional genders. So, we should pay attention to and understand the ways in which the Fourth Love community interacts, create more services for sexual minorities, give them more psychological support, and reduce the stereotypical influence and stigma of sexual minorities. On the other hand, the Fourth-Love Circle should also be further strengthened in terms of management and regulation. As time goes on, the culture of fourth love will gradually come into the public eye, and it itself will face a more complex situation, with more and more people from other groups likely to enter it. And fourth love itself is not a refuge for male cowardice and irresponsibility, nor is it an ideal country for extreme feminism, nor is it a stepping stone for pseudo-straight men (Homosexuals who disguise themselves as heterosexuals because of social pressure) to achieve their goals against traditional marriage.

Third, we look forward to promote the evolution and development of Butler's gender performance theory through the interpretation and research of the Fourth love group, because it provides a distinct subject for the theory of gender performativity in addition to homosexuality. Through the Fourth Love's redefinition and breakthrough of the relationship between the sexes, we can gain a deeper understanding of how gender is shaped and shaped. The Fourth Love also emphasizes the injustice of gender norms in the process of fighting for equal rights, prompting social cognition of gender diversity to change. Additionally, we also look forward to incorporate the research on the fourth love into more theories about sexual minorities (e.g., queer theory) and expanding the research scope of "queer heterosexuality" (Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023), as the label of "queer" is available to those who "defy the rules of normative, respectable adult citizen-ship" (Ward, 2008) and is less about sexual identity or sexual practices.

Finally, as with the status quo of research about pegging in academia (Aguilar, 2017), there is almost no empirical research to date (for a

lone exception, see Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023) that has explored this topic, specifically. We encourage more academic research on fourth love to reflect the growth of the “fourth love” subpopulation in China. While sexual minorities have garnered abundant scholarly attention (Frost et al., 2022; Pachankis & Jackson, 2023), there remains a need for expanded exploration of the Fourth Love (Lin, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2023; Chen, 2012). We expect that scholars will undertake in-depth interpretations of Fourth Love from various disciplinary perspectives, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, and even brain science. Similarly, we also hope that both qualitative and quantitative research methods will be employed to delve into the psychological and behavioral characteristics of Fourth-love people. More importantly, these investigations should embrace a cross-cultural perspective, acknowledging that the Fourth Love paradigm is not exclusive to Chinese youth culture but might manifest in analogous forms within varied cultural contexts. Therefore, we advocate for future research to explore the “fourth love” phenomenon in diverse cultural contexts, gathering empirical data from North America, Europe, or other East Asian societies outside China, such as Korea and Japan, in order to promote a more comprehensive understanding of this group worldwide.

In summary, the notion of “Fourth Love” derives from the context of Chinese youth culture, it reflects the unique mindset, ideology, sexual rights and sexual pleasure of contemporary youth. Fourth love stands as a challenge to the conventional gender order, exploring changing the male-dominated sexual behavior, promoting and supporting the diversity of pleasure, and injecting a fresh individualistic perspective into contemporary Chinese youth culture and enriching the discourse on sexuality. On one hand, Fourth Love endeavors to present a novel gender order by challenging the boundaries of “male and female” and redistributing gender responsibilities and sexual power. While this subversion may not be complete, it signifies a positive effort to broaden the gender landscape and reshape the contemporary youth gender order. On the other hand, Fourth Love simultaneously replicates and subverts the traditional heteronormative context.

In reproducing the traditional heteronormative power structure through parody, the women peggers still mimic the traditional male role claim to want “to be like men,” to have penises, to be in control and to dominate and penetrate their partners, and the men pegged mimics the traditional female role, without fundamentally dismantling the heteronormative matrix (Aguilar, 2017). Indeed, anything embodying a departure from traditional forms of gender performativity can be deemed subversive. As Butler says, all forms of position are contained within the matrix of rights, and the only thing we can do is make a genealogical critique of the practice of self-legitimation (Butler, 1990).

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