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Same-sex marriage, gay marriage, or equal marriage? Category construction in a corpus of 21st century newspaper texts.

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Abstract

Changes to marriage legislation across the globe have received much academic and public attention. However, the labels used to categorise different marital configurations are somewhat under researched. In this paper we analyse the premodification of *marriage* in a corpus of UK newspaper articles (2000–2018) to establish which labels are most commonly used in reference to same-sex marriage. These are *gay marriage*, *same-sex marriage*, *homosexual marriage*, and *equal marriage*. Drawing on the notion of category construction, we emphasise the fact that these labels are not neutral synonyms, as that each encodes a particular understanding of same-sex marriage. Some labels even linguistically exclude certain groups, such as those who are bisexual or transgender. We use the tools of corpus-based discourse analysis to consider the nuanced differences between the category labels and consider whether the limitations of the labels are ever directly challenged.

Keywords: same-sex marriage, gay marriage, category construction, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis

[L]inguistic scholars will be able to map for us the shifts in language that have resulted from this momentous change: when ‘same-sex marriage’ becomes ‘equal marriage’, and finally, just marriage.

(MacCulloch 2018)

1. Introduction

Changes to marriage legislation in countries across the globe have received much academic and public attention (Bachmann 2011, Kania 2020, Ku 2020, Lazar 2002, Love & Baker 2015, McCormick 2015, Vandenbroucke 2020, van der Bom, Coffey-Glover, Jones, Mills & Paterson 2018). However, the nuanced differences between the different labels used for the expansion of legal marriage, particularly *same-sex marriage* and *gay marriage*, are somewhat under researched. The widespread use of these labels means that some groups (i.e. people who are bisexual, asexual, or transgender) are linguistically excluded from and/or backgrounded in wider debates about marriage. Taking a corpus-based approach, we focus on the different terms used to premodify *marriage* in national UK newspapers between 2000 and 2018. We investigate how these terms have changed over time, who they include/exclude, and how they sit in relation to each other.

In section 2, we contextualise our research by providing an overview of recent changes to marriage legislation in the UK. We then introduce our 179 million-word corpus and justify our methodology in section 3 by drawing on key examples of corpus-based research on marriage in the twenty-first century. Our analysis, in section 4, is split into separate discussions of *same-sex marriage*, *gay marriage*, *homosexual marriage* and *equal marriage*. We summarise our findings in section 5 and consider future research on alternative labels such as *heterosexual marriage* and *traditional marriage*.

2. Marriage, identity, and category labels

Since the turn of the millennium, the social construct of marriage has undergone significant changes in the UK. Most relevant for this study were the legal and conceptual changes led by the Civil Partnership Act (2004) and the Marriage (Same-sex couples) Act (2013). These laws were followed by additional legislation including the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act (2019) and the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill (2019).

The Civil Partnership Act (2004) facilitated legally-recognised *unions* (not *marriages*) between same-sex couples and created the category of *civil partnership*. As Bachmann (2011: 80) has argued, this new legal entity of civil partnership disrupted wider ideas surrounding legal unions, and produced new subjects, known as civil partners. Bachman emphasises that those eligible for civil partnerships had ‘existed before’ but civil partnerships ‘constructed a new identity category into which they [could] be put’ (2011: 80). The creation of this social category posed questions of identity: were civil partnerships marriage in all but name or were they different in some regular, identifiable way which could maintain a legal boundary and social distinction between *marriage* and *civil partnerships*?

Guidelines from the Government Equality Office (2019) show that while civil partnerships afford people many of the same rights as marriage, there are differences in how the two are viewed in law. For example, the two terms are held distinct (someone who is married cannot legally call themselves civil partnered and vice versa) and civil partnerships are ended by dissolution not divorce. Originally, same-sex adultery was insufficient for dissolution and civil partnerships could not be annulled on grounds of non-consummation, as is the case for heterosexual marriage (Government Equality Office 2019). Thus, despite suggestions that civil partnerships were marriage by another name, the legal distinction suggests that these category labels index fundamentally different social relationships that are associated with different expected behaviours. Notably, since the first draft of this paper, the law in England

and Wales has now changed; both divorce and dissolution are now granted based on the criterion that a ‘relationship has broken down irretrievably’ (HM Courts & Tribunal Services 2022), thus potentially bringing the legal understanding of marriage and civil partnerships closer together. This change was likely influenced by the fact that same-sex couples now have the legal right to convert an existing civil partnership into a marriage and civil partnerships are now available to heterosexual couples.

This paper seeks neither to endorse nor reject a particular conceptualisation of civil partnerships (nor marriage) but to consider the social power that category labels can have in shaping our expectations of adult relationships and legal unions. As such, our analysis is founded on the principles of critical discourse analysis (Breit 2010, Fairclough 2001) which sees language as a form of social practice that is reflective and constitutive of social norms and values. These norms are influenced by the relative power of social actors/groups and can shift over time. For example, the distinction between *married* and *civil partner* was tested even further by the passing of the Marriage (same-sex couples) Act (2013), which gave same-sex couples legal access to marriage. Language played a key role in parliamentary and media debates about the Act as those opposed claimed that the definition of marriage was fixed as ‘the union of/between a man and a woman’ (Paterson & Coffey-Glover 2018: 192). Yet the passing of the Act meant this definition could no longer hold. It also showed that the politicians who passed the Act had the power to change the legal definition of marriage, while those in opposition did not have enough power to maintain their preferred status quo.

As with the introduction of civil partnerships, debates about the 2013 Act highlighted a potential lexical gap. If politicians, campaigners, theologians, etc. were to debate this topic, how were they going to differentiate between marriage as it was pre-2013 and marriage as it could be post-2013? There were two primary terms that came to the fore. *Same-sex marriage*, which potentially excludes people who are non-binary, was the term used in law, while *gay*

marriage, which potentially excludes lesbians, bisexual people, and those who do not self-identify as *gay*, was used most prominently in the mass media (Paterson & Coffey-Glover 2018, van der Bom et al. 2015). There was also a lesser-used term, *equal marriage*, which did not gain much traction, not least because the initial legislation was not equal, as the 2013 Act did not adequately address the needs of people who are transgender. In the present paper we use *same-sex marriage*, as this is the term used in law, although we note its limitations.

The modification of *marriage* with labels like *same-sex* and *gay* implies that there is some significant, qualitative difference between the marriages of heterosexual and homosexual couples. This phenomenon – where *same-sex marriage* is the marked form and heterosexual *marriage* is the unmarked form – is a realisation of what Bachmann (2011: 89) terms a ‘discourse of difference’. This refers to the systematic and repeated representation of same-sex relationships as if they are ‘fundamentally’ different to and ‘not regarded as equivalent to’ heterosexual married relationships (Bachmann 2011: 89).

However, adherence to the discourse of difference is not absolute. Writing on the fifth anniversary of the first same-sex marriages in the UK, Reverend Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch (2018) argued that the expansion of marriage was ‘an astonishing turnaround’ of attitudes to homosexuality. He predicted that due to these changing attitudes there would be a shift in terminology (perhaps a generational one) where *same-sex marriage* was replaced by *equal marriage* and ultimately ‘just marriage’. Furthermore, MacCulloch saw linguists as the people to document any changes in terminology. However, what is of particular interest is not just the relative frequencies of the labels, but rather the subtle differences between them. The fact that there were different, potentially competing labels suggests that each conveyed a different meaning. Thus, choosing whether to refer to *same-sex*, *gay*, or *equal marriage* is not an inconsequential choice of neutral synonyms; each term is situated within the wider social context of debates about law, religion, and attitudes to homosexuality. As Bowker and Star

(2000: 156) note ‘each category [label] valorizes some point of view and silences another’, and we can question why these labels were used, what each one means, and what ideological function(s) their use performs. Thus, taking up MacCulloch’s challenge, we ask:

1. What are the most frequent modifiers of marriage (*same-sex, gay, equal, etc.*) and do trends in usage change over time?
2. What discourses and/or connotations are linked to each category label?
3. Is the exclusionary nature of any label directly challenged?

Before presenting our responses to these questions, there are two caveats we wish to make. Firstly, we are both heterosexual and so same-sex marriage legislation did not impact us directly, especially compared to those who wanted to get married before 2013 and could not. For more information see Gupta (2015) and Violet (2020) for personal reflections on the impacts of legislation that excludes individuals from marriage. Secondly, we acknowledge MacCulloch’s underlying assumption that the movement from *same-sex marriage* to ‘just marriage’ is an overwhelmingly positive trend. While champions of same-sex marriage have foregrounded equality, human rights, and the legal and moral recognition of love between same-sex partners, alternative perspectives are available. For example, McCormick’s (2016) queer perspective on same-sex marriage legislation in South Africa is highly critical of the overarching ‘social good’ narrative:

...same-sex marriage is problematic because it ignores the regulatory power of the state, the fact that marriage is a public tradition, the argument that the supposed “respectability” bestowed by marriage is a farce, and the contention that legal benefits should be given to people regardless of their marital status

(McCormick 2016: 1).

As McCormick’s perspective shows, not all people want ‘just marriage’. There can be value in differentiating heterosexual and homosexual relationships and experiences, not least

in a bid to avoid the homonormativity (c.f. Duggan 2002) of imposing heteronormative ideals onto homosexual (and other queer) relationships. Indeed, Jones (2018: 59) argues that ‘gay men and lesbians who engage in practices such as marriage and child-rearing, and perform broadly gender normative identities, are rewarded for being good citizens’ while those who do not may ‘continue to be marginalised’. Thus, although MacCulloch’s endorsement of the concept of ‘just marriage’ is well meaning, we acknowledge that it is legitimate for individuals to reject marriage and, furthermore, to be truly equal, *marriage* needs to be understood as a label for a heterogeneous category that covers a diverse range of experiences.

3. Methodology

To systematically track the use of different labels over time, we chose a corpus-based discourse analysis approach. Thus, this paper sits within a broader set of studies that have used this methodology to investigate marriage and civil partnerships. Love and Baker (2017) and Findlay (2017) used corpus techniques to analyse UK parliamentary debates on same-sex marriage. They too found that opponents of change focused on the ‘linguistic rigidity’ (Findlay 2017: 34) of the definition of marriage. Paterson and Coffey-Glover’s (2018: 191) corpus-based discourse analysis of same-sex marriage in the UK print media showed that *gay marriage* was more frequent than *homosexual marriage* or *heterosexual marriage*, but they did not track changes in usage over time/publication. Not dissimilar to the present paper, they drew on national newspaper texts, but their corpus was more specialised; our corpus is larger and covers a longer timeframe.

Corpus-based approaches have also been popular for research on marriage in other countries: Kania (2020) used a corpus of national newspapers to look at representations of same-sex marriage in Germany, Santonocito (2018) contrasted same-sex marriage debates in a corpus of political texts/speeches from the US and UK, and Poulos (2020) undertook

corpus analysis to interrogate the relationship between same-sex marriage and religious freedoms in parliamentary speeches in Australia. Thus, the present paper adds to the body of research on the attitudes surrounding marriage in the twenty-first century.

Our corpus covers the years 2000 to 2018 and includes over 215,031 articles from national UK newspapers (178,702,069 words). To be included in the corpus, at least one of the following search terms had to occur anywhere within an article: (marriage OR marriages OR civil partnership OR civil partnerships). We kept our selection criteria broad as this paper is part of a larger piece of work on the grammatical patterning of *marriage* (for more details see McGlashan & Paterson, at review). Articles were downloaded from Nexis (<https://www.nexis.com/>) and were parsed and cleaned using methods developed in R (<https://cran.r-project.org/>). For this paper we have used a subset of the corpus, analysing only those publications that were in circulation for the duration of 2000–2018 and which published over 100 articles including one of our search terms. Table 1 shows the breakdown of this sub-corpus by source. Sunday editions have been counted under the general masthead, as our analysis does not distinguish between weekday and weekend editions.

Rank	Source	Total articles	Rank	Source	Total articles
1	The Times	31,483	7	Independent	13,754
2	The Sun	25,953	8	The Express	12,514
3	The Guardian	25,936	9	Daily Star	10,315
4	The Mirror	20,274	10	The People	2,908
5	Daily Mail	20,048	11	Morning Star	480
6	The Telegraph	18,211			

Table 1: Number of articles in corpus by source

The raw figures in Table 1 should be interpreted with caution as there is no way to determine what proportion of each newspapers' output these articles represent. This is because newspapers publish different numbers of articles per day/week/etc. Thus, we cannot generate relative frequencies for the number of articles published by each source and, as such, this data

has been provided for context only. That is, we make no claims about any relationship between the number of articles published and each sources' apparent interest in marriage. Also, these figures are for the whole corpus and not all articles are concerned with same-sex marriage. To narrow the focus to the category labels under scrutiny, our analysis begins with a high-level discussion of patterns across the corpus, including the number of hits for the different category labels. We take a closer look at the distribution of different labels across sources in section 4.1 and scrutinise each of the four main labels in sections 4.2–4.5.

4. Analysis

To determine the most prominent category labels relating to same-sex marriage we uploaded our corpus to Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff, Baisa, Bušta, Jakubíček, Kovář, Michelfeit, Rychlý, & Suchomel 2014) and used log likelihood to generate the top 100 L1 collocates of *marriage* (i.e. the words most likely to immediately premodify *marriage*). The most common L1 collocate that related to sexuality was *gay*, occurring over 12 thousand times (Table 2), followed by *same-sex* (and *same sex*) with over 8 thousand hits, while *homosexual* was much less frequent. We also searched for *equal marriage*, *bisexual marriage*, and *trans* marriage*, even though *bisexual* and *trans* did not appear in the top 100 L1 collocates, because these terms directly responded to the questions of labelling raised by MacCulloch's (2018) blog post. *Equal marriage* was almost eleven times less frequent than *same-sex marriage*, while *bisexual marriage* and *trans* marriage* were practically absent.

	Tokens
gay marriage	12,131
same-sex marriage	8,738
equal marriage	872
homosexual marriage	273
bisexual marriage	1
trans* marriage	0

Total 22,014

Table 2: Hits for premodifier + *marriage* in the whole corpus

One explanation for the apparent dominance of *gay marriage* appears to be that *same-sex marriage* became part of media discourse at a later point (Figure 1). The first hit for *gay marriage* occurred in January 2000 in the *Daily Mail* and the first hit for *same-sex marriage* occurred in January 2002 in *The Times*. *Equal marriage* comes much later in February 2011 (in the *Guardian*), which may account for the fact that there were fewer than 1000 hits. We might take the use of *equal marriage* towards the end of our corpus as tentative evidence for the trajectory proposed by MacCulloch (2018) although the numbers are small. Indeed, there are isolated instances in the concordance lines for *equal marriage* where it is used to refer to same-sex marriage legislation, but this is not a major trend (see section 4.5).

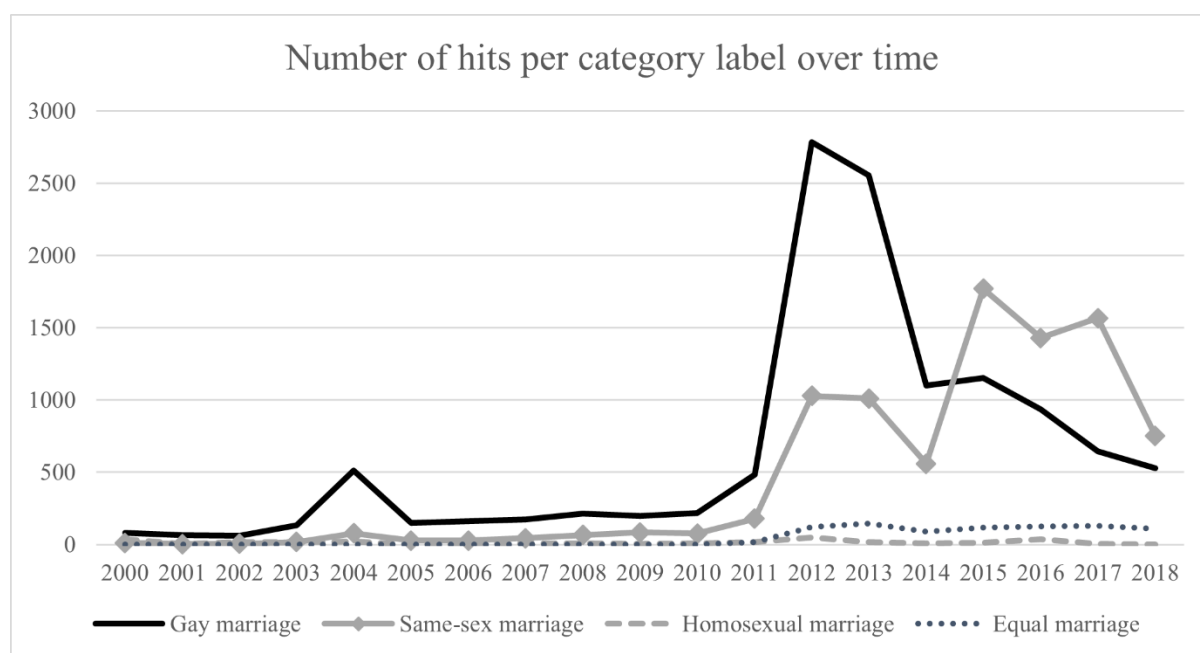


Figure 1: Hits per category label 2000–2018

To identify trends in how these category labels were used we generated concordance lines for each label (span +/- 20 words) and downloaded them for closer scrutiny. We used a form of contrastive concordance analysis (adapted from Paterson & Gregory 2019: 73) to generate a keyword list for each set of concordances, using the concordances for the other labels as a reference corpus (i.e. the concordance lines for *gay marriage* were compared with the combined concordance lines for *same-sex marriage*, *equal marriage*, and *homosexual marriage*). As contrastive concordance analysis is not a function available in Sketch Engine, we uploaded each set of concordance lines into Wordsmith Tools (Scott 2019) and used Log ratio (min freq. = 5, $p < 0.05$) to calculate four sets of keywords. This allowed us to draw out the most salient differences in how each category label was used. Table 3 shows the top 30 keywords (ranked by log likelihood score) for each label.

	<i>gay marriage</i>		<i>same sex marriage</i>		<i>equal marriage</i>		<i>homosexual marriage</i>	
1	gay	11,086.05	sex	14,208.45	equal	4,999.29	homosexual	206.39
2	Tory	307.58	same	13,676.03	northern	119.28	Bullock	131.67
3	Tories	150.47	plebiscite	939.08	Samoa	109.49	quaint	85.43
4	UKIP	140.54	Labor	479.28	LGBT	69.40	significance	83.38
5	Europe	100.64	samesex	454.44	proud	60.72	hails	81.19
6	cake	98.45	Turnbull	397.80	Farron	53.16	bowing	81.19
7	aid	70.47	Abbott	367.87	Sana	44.29	shoppies	77.83
8	slogan	47.96	postal	361.05	Samaritans	43.02	shape	59.44
9	bakery	47.47	survey	299.97	Salvoes	43.02	conscience	58.08
10	wind	40.29	Australian	275.41	plural	43.02	parliamentarians	56.60
11	Downing	40.21	Australia	261.05	Stonewall	39.93	determined	52.98
12	floods	39.41	related	227.95	Salvo	39.65	regard	45.62
13	councillor	38.63	Australians	198.38	petition	37.98	fundamental	41.66
14	Kerry	38.40	block	190.76	verdict	35.88	sweat	41.40
15	Farage	38.36	shorten	181.92	enthused	35.10	heterosexual	41.06
16	Dems	38.17	AEST	140.32	TUC	33.64	context	40.88
17	conservatism	37.69	Malcolm	125.18	Sambuca	33.56	couldn't	39.00
18	Hague	36.05	room	124.18	Warsaw	32.96	deny	38.84
19	Thatcher	34.62	Entsch	122.39	confuse	32.13	inevitable	38.30
20	Morgan	34.51	LGBTI	103.63	muddled	31.52	document	36.01
21	loons	32.71	Morrison	97.05	devolved	30.88	clinic	34.22
22	sesame	31.69	published	96.48	reading	29.36	Joe	33.83
23	Osborne	31.63	Brandis	95.26	formerly	29.00	family	33.48
24	rebels	30.96	Bernardi	91.80	Marr	26.58	Dr	31.13
25	crazy	30.50	Greens	86.47	army	26.08	simple	30.59

26	turbines	30.50	binding	85.64	Hayward	25.41	question	29.14
27	metropolitan	30.04	senator	82.49	forward	24.48	future	28.91
28	Hutchings	28.79	senate	73.49	incredibly	23.02	surrogate	27.03
29	Iraq	27.69	Cory	72.40	pretend	22.12	nuclear	25.42
30	Clarke	27.21	GMT	71.50	NATO	22.12	condoms	25.08

Table 3: Top 30 keywords (ranked by LL) for each label

The first takeaway from the keyword lists is that for *gay marriage* and *same-sex marriage* there appears to be a focus on individuals, signified by the occurrence of surnames of political figures. However, each label appears to be associated with different people. *Same-sex marriage* is associated with Australian officials such as Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull, and Scott Morrison (indeed the focus on Australian same-sex marriage debates is reinforced by the occurrence of *postal*, *ballot* and *Australia* in the keyword list). One partial reason for this finding is that reports on Australian politics tended to cluster in the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, both of which showed a preference for *same-sex marriage* over other labels (see section 4.1). By contrast, *gay marriage* has more keywords relating to UK political parties (*UKIP*, *Tories*) and Conservative MPs (*Clarke*, *Hague*, *Thatcher*, *Osbourne*). The keywords for *equal marriage* contain more references to institutions (*NATO*, *Samaritans*, *Stonewall*) than individuals, while the keywords for *homosexual marriage* seem to be more varied. The occurrence of *NATO* as a keyword for *equal marriage* is explained by repeated references to a speech by David Cameron at a NATO summit, where he was reportedly *extremely proud of introducing equal marriage*. Also notable is the occurrence of *bakery*, *cake*, and *slogan* in the keywords for *gay marriage*. These relate to a legal case where, in 2014, the owners of a bakery in Belfast refused to bake a cake with the slogan ‘Support Gay Marriage’. Further analysis is needed to determine why this story was so newsworthy but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Of course, keyword lists generated in this manner emphasise the differences between concordance lines. As such, Table 3 cannot show the similarities in how each label was used. This accounts for the absence of references to politicians and religious leaders who have been

shown to be key social actors in the UK press’ coverage of same-sex marriage. It is the case, however, that the concordance lines for each label included references to (ex-)Prime Minister David Cameron, who oversaw the passing of the 2013 Act, as well as religious leaders such as Rowan Williams and Justin Welby (the successive Archbishops of Canterbury), plus several US political figures, especially Barack Obama. The fact that none of these people’s surnames or titles appear in Table 3 suggests they were associated with same-sex marriage debates more generally, rather than with a particular category label. Nevertheless, the keywords indicate that the different labels may carry slightly different connotations and/or may be associated with different topics. To understand the nuances of their use we consider whether different newspapers (with different political stances) used the labels differently.

4.1 Category label by source

To investigate whether different publications showed a preference for one label over another we disaggregated the concordance lines by source (Table 4). All newspapers used multiple labels, with generally a clear preference for one (Figure 2).

	Gay Marriage	Same sex marriage	Equal marriage	Homosexual marriage	TOTAL
Daily Mail	1084	328	30	52	1494
Daily Star	111	23	1	1	136
Independent	1865	796	170	24	2855
Morning Star	67	59	15	1	142
The Express	450	94	6	9	559
The Guardian	3377	4659	369	55	8460
The Mirror	581	340	59	3	983
The People	31	22	0	0	53
The Sun	709	378	30	13	1130
The Telegraph	1271	881	66	69	2287
The Times	2585	1158	126	46	3915
	12140	8738	872	273	22023

Table 4: Hits per masthead

The *Daily Star* (81.62%), *The Express* (80.5%), and the *Daily Mail* (72.56%) used *gay marriage* proportionally more than the other newspapers. While two of these newspapers are conservative/right-leaning, the *Daily Star* does not officially endorse any political party. By contrast, the left-leaning newspapers *The Guardian* and the *Morning Star* were least likely to use *gay marriage* and used *same-sex marriage* proportionally more. Thus, while there is no left/right split (indeed such a simplistic split was not expected), left-leaning publications showed a stronger preference for the term used in legislation (*same-sex marriage*).

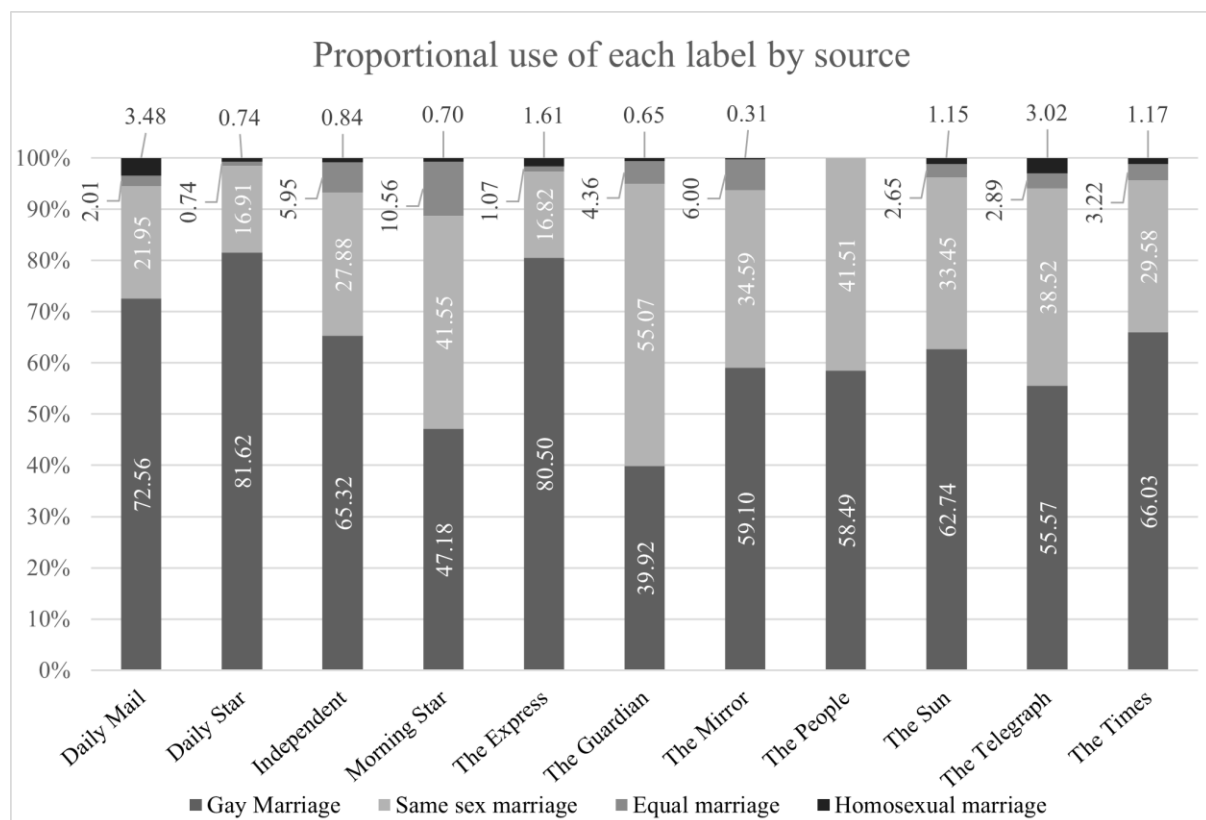


Figure 2: Proportional use of category labels by masthead

Of course, quantifying the use of the different labels across sources does not tell us how these labels were used (differently) in wider discourse. To investigate how each label was used, we manually analysed a 10% sample of concordance lines for each category label for each newspaper (i.e. 108 concordance lines for *gay marriage* in the *Daily Mail*, 11 in the *Daily Star*,

187 in the *Independent*, etc.). In total, this amounted to 2201 concordance lines selected using systematic sampling to ensure that our analysis covered the whole timespan of the corpus. The analysis was inductive, with no a priori codes imposed on the data. This bottom-up approach meant the analysis was not restricted by our expectations (based on wider research on same-sex marriage) and left space for unexpected patterns to emerge from the data. This approach facilitated the identification of major trends in the topics covered by the articles and the stances taken within them (i.e. whether an article was pro- or anti-same-sex marriage). In most cases the +/- 20 word span was sufficient, but where necessary we looked at longer stretches of context by returning to the original articles. The following sections consider each label in turn.

4.2 Same-sex marriage

Starting with trends in the use of *same-sex marriage* across the whole corpus, it was notable that although our data was from UK-based publications, the newspapers gave a significant amount of coverage to marriage debates in the USA (1) and Australia. Of course, UK debates were well represented, as were slightly later debates held in Ireland. Legislation in other countries, however, was rarely discussed in depth, and references to other countries tended to come as part of lists of places where legislation had been passed (2).

- (1) *President Obama, although he still supports civil unions over same-sex marriage, said yesterday that he believes the Defense of Marriage Act should be repealed (Guardian, December 2010)*
- (2) *His ratification would make Portugal the sixth country in Europe to allow same-sex marriages after Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Norway (The Telegraph, May 2010)*

The key issues associated with same-sex marriage were legal debates and the passing of legislation, the views of individual politicians, and the views of religious leaders (particularly

Christians). References to religion did not always correlate with opposition to same-sex marriage, but in the main, this was the primary trend. Explicitly homophobic statements were rare, but they did occur (3).

- (3) *A prominent member of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, Mr Paisley is a critic of same-sex marriage and has said he finds homosexuality repulsive (The Telegraph, May 2010)*

Overall, same-sex marriage was discussed in a rather general sense; the term was not gendered, nor did it explicitly include lesbians or bisexual people. When individuals were mentioned, they tended to be celebrities (Jay-Z, David Furnish), some of whom were gay, but what was missing from the media discourse was any (systematic) input from LGBTQ+ people who would be most affected by same-sex marriage legislation.

Taking each source individually, *The Telegraph* predominantly focused on religious beliefs and the opposition to same-sex marriage from *church groups* who are quoted as charging the government with *pure propaganda* and running a *sham consultation* on same-sex marriage that ignored the voices of those opposed. Similarly, the *Daily Mail* closely aligned *same-sex marriage* legislation with a (Conservative) government agenda to win over liberal voters but noted that this came as part of a longer chain of opposition to Christian beliefs.

- (4) *Views that Christians have held dear for generations on euthanasia, same-sex marriage and abortion have been systematically attacked by Parliament, Labour's equality laws and the courts (Daily Mail, April 2010).*

Example (4) comes from before the same-sex marriage consultation was announced and, as such, pre-empted government-led same-sex marriage debates. By treating same-sex marriage as part of a list of potentially controversial issues such as euthanasia and abortion (the latter of which also featured in *The Times'* concordance lines), the *Daily Mail* framed same-sex marriage negatively. However, examples like (4) never explicitly state what the apparent links

between these issues comprised; same-sex marriage does not, for example, involve any medical procedure and/or death, so its conflation with euthanasia seems unfounded.

However, we will concede that, while logically one does not follow the other (i.e. the legalisation of same-sex marriage does not lead to the legalisation of euthanasia) there are two particular lenses through which one could see these issues as connected. The first is that same-sex marriage, abortion, and euthanasia all concern issues of human rights (although this is not a dominant line of argumentation in the corpus). The second is that, despite the UK being a secular society, debates about same-sex marriage, abortion, and euthanasia all tend to draw on notions of religious freedoms. Indeed, Turner, Mills, van der Bom, Coffey-Glover, Paterson, and Jones (2018) found that standing in opposition to same-sex marriage on religious grounds was a rhetorical tactic used to position Christians (in particular) as the potential victims of same-sex marriage legislation.

The *Independent* noted the discursively-constructed opposition between same-sex marriage and religious beliefs (across different faiths) but took a rather more scathing stance. Example (5) is taken from a comment piece referencing debates in the House of Commons and is indicative of the *Independent*'s explicitly pro-same-sex marriage stance.

- (5) *Several of the MPs who spoke ardently in favour of the ancient teaching of the churches on marriage were divorced and several times remarried. Others made preposterous claims. Ian Paisley Jnr complained about Christophobia as if his family had always devoted itself to campaigning against prejudice in all its forms; Matthew Offord moaned that he had been called a bigot for equating same-sex marriage to incest and polygamy; and all around there was a nasty pervasive smell of immolating martyr. It was enough to put one off religion (Independent, February 2013)*

While not always expressed in such a sarcastic tone and overtly evaluative terms (*moaned, martyr, preposterous*), this example demonstrates the *Independent*'s tendency to name MPs

who voted against same-sex marriage legislation. This trend was also found in *The Express* and the *Mirror*, the latter of which focused particularly on Nicky Morgan voting against the legislation while she was Minister for Women and Equality. However, *The Times* (and indeed most other newspapers) highlighted that Morgan subsequently changed her position (although her vote stood). A lot of the *Independent's* coverage was devoted to reporting the passing of legislation in other countries – thus positioning same-sex marriage as a global affair rather than one of British politics – and to polls which gauged public opinion on the topic.

This global positioning was also a feature of the *Guardian's* use of *same-sex marriage*, as there were references to legislation around the world (including in India, Nigeria, Ireland, France, Netherlands, Vietnam, Canada, Mexico, Australia, and the USA). Opinion polls (particularly those showing support for same-sex marriage) were also referred to by the *Guardian*, which tended to focus on the legal procedures for same-sex marriage. However, where the *Guardian* differed from many other publications was in its acknowledgment that not all those opposed to same-sex marriage were religious, nor were all religious people (particularly Christians) opposed to same-sex marriage.

Having established a baseline for how *same-sex marriage* (the term used in official legislation) was used both across the corpus and within each source, the following sections contrast this with how alternative labels were used.

4.3 Gay marriage

Gay marriage was systematically linked to the idea that politicians were using discussions of marriage legislation as part of a broader political agenda (6). This argument is particularly aimed at the right-leaning Conservative party in the UK who oversaw the passing of the 2013 Act. To this end, *gay marriage* was positioned as a tactic to distract from other issues, such as tax reform, which were presented as more important. Thus, *gay marriage* was cast as a political

tool, with the implication being that the politicians making it a priority were doing so for political gain rather than a real interest in equality. This suggests that *gay marriage* was linked to political power in a way that *same-sex marriage* was not.

(6) *Instead, they've devoted much energy to minority issues such as gay marriage, which concerns very few, but carries favour with the political intelligentsia (Daily Mail, May 2012)*

But, as with *same-sex marriage* and *homosexual marriage* (see below), *gay marriage* was also linked with *controversial* issues such as abortion law and *quickest divorces*.

Overall, while *gay marriage* was not used explicitly to refer solely to men, the term has the potential to background the experiences of lesbians and bisexuals and could add to their erasure from public discourse (c.f. Wilkinson 2019). There was no indication in the concordance lines that the definition of *gay marriage* and who it included/excluded was up for debate. The term *gay* was only considered problematic when paired with *marriage* (insofar as opponents of *gay marriage* took *marriage* to mean ‘a man and a woman’), but *gay* itself was not problematised in terms of the potential exclusion of other LGBTQ+ individuals. Indeed there is a tension that extends beyond same-sex marriage debates between the use of *gay* as a pseudo-generic catchall term (Paterson & Coffey-Glover 2018: 185–186) and the initialism *LGBTQ+*, which suggest that *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *trans*, and *queer* are separate identities (although individuals may identify with multiple labels). Notably, *LGBTQ+ marriage* only occurred once in the corpus in reference to an Oscar Wilde art installation. Although beyond the scope of this paper, there is clearly more research to be done on the use of *gay* as an imperfect hypernym for the broader spectrum of identities covered by *LGBTQ+*.

Moving on to individual sources, *The Sun* positioned *gay marriage* as a minor social issue (7) that, by implication should not have been prioritised by the UK government, although an April 2014 editorial stated that the newspaper had *supported gay marriage unequivocally*.

A similar trend, whereby *gay marriage* was positioned as unimportant was also found in the *Daily Mail* and *The Express* (8), the latter of which contrasted the apparent irrelevance of gay marriage with its support for (heterosexual) parents to marry.

(7) *The issue of gay marriage ranks at about 418 on the list of stuff people care about and want to see done (The Sun, February 2013)*

(8) *Encouraging parents to marry before they have children would prevent a huge amount of misery and save a fortune in benefits paid to support single parents. In contrast to gay marriage this is an extremely important issue (The Express, February 2013)*

This false equivalence, however, is not logically justifiable; the passing (or not) of same-sex marriage legislation was never in a causal relationship with the number of heterosexual parents getting married. In fact, passing the Marriage (Same-sex couples) Act would increase the number of parents able to marry given that same-sex parents had previously only had civil partnerships available to them.

Linking *gay marriage* to a moral panic about declining values (however defined) was a key theme in the concordance lines from *The Express*, as exemplified by (9). Here we see several isolated events, expressed in simplistic terms, drawn together to suggest a pattern of events which are, in the wider article, *making a mockery of Christian values*.

(9) *So terrified are we now of upsetting people that a serviceman in uniform can be turned away from a hospital, a carer disciplined for saying God bless and a man demoted with a 40 per cent pay cut just for opposing gay marriage on his personal Facebook page. Britain is turning into a nation of cringers afraid of their own shadow (The Express, October 2015)*

Moral panics and the use of slippery slope metaphors (see van der Bom et al. 2015, also example 10) occurred in some of the earliest articles referencing *gay marriage*. These articles opposed the repeal of Section 28 (a law which had prevented UK schools from ‘promoting’

homosexuality and which positioned heterosexual relationships as normative). They occurred primarily in the *Daily Mail*, which questioned in January 2000 whether the move to repeal this legislation was part of *a hidden agenda to allow gay marriage and gay adoption of children*, a notion that also appeared in the concordances for *homosexual marriage*. The *Daily Mail* also positioned *gay marriage* as a threat to heterosexual marriage, arguing that same-sex marriage *abolishes marriage and puts a new, flimsier institution in its place* (August 2008), with *husband and wife* being *officially axed from marriage laws* (11). This slippery slope would, allegedly, lead to parents being labelled as *Progenitor A* or *B*.

(10) *This is the same Johnson who, in 2008, declared: If gay marriage is OK and I am uncertain on the issue then I see no reason why in principle a union should not be consecrated between three men, as well as two men; or indeed three men and a dog* (*Daily Mail*, August 2012)

(11) *The Government will launch its consultation on gay marriage today. The plan could see the term "husband and wife" officially axed from marriage laws so that gay couples are not left out. Fathers and mothers could also be renamed Progenitor A and Progenitor B, leading QC and Labour peer Lord Brennan claimed* (*Daily Mail*, March 2013)

(12) *Ukip MEP Roger Helmer for example recently suggested that gay marriage legislation opened the door to incestuous (sic) marriage. [...] Ukip is seeking to tap into an aggrieved sense of rightful superiority on the part of relatively privileged groups and to bolster it through various forms of discrimination against inferior others* (*Guardian*, December 2012)

This slippery slope framing of gay marriage was also found in the *Guardian* (12), although it only occurred in this newspaper to discredit such rhetorical tactics.

Some of the most explicitly anti-gay-marriage examples came from *The Telegraph*, which published an article by Cardinal Keith O'Brien (Scotland's then senior Catholic official), who claimed that *the proposals to allow same-sex unions are madness and a grotesque subversion of a universally accepted human right* (March 2011). Most of the newspapers in our corpus had articles referring to O'Brien's words, but they have been associated with *The Telegraph* in this analysis as *The Sunday Telegraph* was their initial site of publication.

Yet despite the anti-same-sex marriage stance taken by *The Telegraph* during the UK legislation process (see also Paterson & Coffey-Glover 2018), there are some examples (13) where the newspaper published pieces that took a pro- stance on gay marriage.

(13) *I wanted to write about the passing into law of gay marriage. Not in a yah-boo, we win!-type way: I know some find the change, signed into law by the Queen on Wednesday, troubling. But I wanted to try, again, to make another attempt to convince sceptics that heterosexual marriage has not been devalued in the process, that the impact will be to increase the sum of peace, happiness and stability in this world (The Telegraph, July 2013)*

Examples such as this emphasise that when analysing newspaper texts we cannot see mastheads as monolithic in their stance towards a particular issue. Rather, one of the benefits of a corpus-based discourse approach is that we can demonstrate overarching tendencies and then use these to identify outliers like (13).

4.4 Homosexual marriage

Although occurring much less frequently in our corpus, *homosexual marriage* was also linked to individual politicians, legal debates, and religious arguments, but there were also a range of less-prominent trends that did not occur elsewhere. For example, *homosexual marriage* was

delegitimised through the use of hedges like *kind of* (14) and implicitly negative evaluations like *so-called* (15). Significantly, example (14) comes from sentiments expressed by then-Pope Benedict XVI, while (15) quotes an MP in the Polish government, demonstrating that an anti-homosexual marriage stance was taken by individuals with significant social power. There were also references to *gay lifestyles* that needed to be *tolerated* or *condemned*.

(14) *On the other hand, to create a legal form of a kind of homosexual marriage, in reality, does not help these people* (*The Times*, December 2008)

(15) *What is your attitude to the legalisation of so-called "homosexual marriages"?* (*Independent*, September 2011)

Homosexual marriage was linked to death and destruction and outdated tropes of homosexual (usually) men being linked to paedophilia and the grooming of children (16), although notably this example sets out such arguments to refute them.

(16) *Rhetoric has been rich but facts scarce over the past several days as morality and politics have conflated to paint a nightmare vision of Britain: one in which paedophiles flood our schools, homosexual marriage is the norm, and heterosexual children are recruited by the lure of the gay lifestyle* (*Independent*, January 2000)

The *Daily Mail* in particular makes links between *laws giv[ing] transsexuals freedom to marry* and the *inevitability* of homosexual marriage which, at its extreme, is linked to Nazi imposition of rule (17). Further, homosexual marriage is also referenced in articles concerning the repeal of Section 28, which is characterised as starting *a gay revolution*, the ultimate goal of which would be marriage (18). Of the 13 hits for *homosexual marriage* in *The Sun*, 8 of them made reference to the opposition to repealing Section 28.

(17) *MARY Macleod, the Home Secretary's choice to head the National Family and Parenting Institute, says that homosexual marriage is "inevitable". Having lived through the years when Hitler's victory over the "decadent" democracies was inevitable and then when*

nationalisation was inevitable and "progress" to socialism and on to communism was inevitable, I know what "inevitable" as used by folk such as Mary Macleod really means (Daily Mail, September 2000)

(18) *CHILDREN as young as five face pro-gay lessons if the ban on classroom propaganda is lifted, Labour MP Stuart Bell warned last night. He said it was just the start of a gay revolution leading to a lower age of consent and homosexual marriage (The Sun, January 2000)*

There was thus a tendency for *homosexual marriage* to be used with more explicitly negative language and more rhetorically forceful arguments than the other labels. This may be because *homosexual* as a general term has been shown to have (historically) negative semantic prosody (Baker 2005: 77). For example, comparing *gay* and *homosexual* in the British National Corpus and Corpus of Contemporary American English, Gustara (2019) found more positive terms, such as *equality* and *liberation*, associated with *gay*, while *homosexual* collocated with *rape*, *infection*, *disease*, and *AIDS*. Another, related, finding is that, proportionally, *homosexual marriage* tended to be used towards the beginning of the corpus. Taking all four labels analysed together *homosexual marriage* accounted for 29.3% of hits in 2000, but only 0.14% of hits in 2018. This drop in use could be indicative of broader changes in attitudes to homosexual relationships. For example, the British Social Attitudes Survey showed that 64% of people agreed that same-sex relationships were ‘not wrong at all’ in 2015, an increase of 5 percentage points since 2012 (Swales & Attar Taylor 2017: 4). Another, perhaps more cynical reading of the decreased use of *homosexual marriage* is that over the period covered by our corpus it became less socially acceptable to express prejudicial views explicitly (see van der Bom et al. 2015 for a discussion of implicit homophobia in the UK media). Whichever position (if any) holds, there were some examples where *homosexual marriage* was presented as a human right

with legal protections, but this framing occurred in isolated concordances and did not represent a trend.

4.5 Equal marriage

Finally, for *equal marriage* some of the topics identified above (religious concerns, politicians' opinions, legislation) were repeated, but there were also references to campaigns – particularly those where *equal marriage* was part of the name of a group of campaigners, such as the Coalition for Equal Marriage and the Equal Marriage Campaign. There was also acknowledgement of the impact of marriage legislation explicitly on lesbians and people who are transgender (19) as voiced by protesters outside a meeting of the anti-same-sex marriage Coalition for Marriage.

(19) *A group of about 60 lesbian, gay and transsexual rights campaigners held placards advocating equal marriage outside the meeting and shouted bigots at those entering the hall (The Telegraph, October 2012)*

The label *equal marriage* was also debated more explicitly. As Paterson and Coffey-Glover (2018: 199) note, access to marriage can only be deemed equal if it is open to 'two consenting adults of any gender identity, biological sex, or sexuality' and this was not enshrined in the Marriage (Same-sex Couples) Act (2013). In the corpus, *equal marriage* was referred to as *the preferred term* in the *Daily Mail*, which quoted individuals claiming that the original Bill did not *include people equally*. This also occurred in the *Guardian* (20).

(20) *It doesn't include full equal marriage for people who are transgender and our fight for rights and freedom will continue, he said (Guardian, April 2017)*

Thus, the nuance of meaning of the term *equal marriage* was above the level of public consciousness in a way that was not shown to be the case for *same-sex* or *gay marriage*. Towards the latter dates in the corpus, *equality* (in the form *marriage equality*, at least) began

to overtake *gay marriage* and *same-sex marriage* in popularity. This term was not scrutinised here due to our focus on premodification, but shows potential for further investigation as marriage legislation continues to change globally.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Our analysis has shown that *gay marriage* and *same-sex marriage* were the most popular category labels used in debates about same-sex marriage legislation (RQ1). There were two less prominent labels: *homosexual marriage*, which was more prevalent towards the earlier part of the corpus, and *equal marriage*, which rose in popularity towards the end of the 2000–2018 timeframe. However, neither of these labels could match the dominance of *gay marriage* or *same-sex marriage*. Alternative labels such as *bisexual marriage* and *trans* marriage* did not systematically occur in our corpus, suggesting that these labels are not core components of media (and/or political) debates about marriage in the twenty-first century.

Similarly, *heterosexual marriage* (n = 342) was relatively uncommon, as its meaning was understood to be expressed in the unmarked form *marriage*. Given MacCulloch's suggestion that *marriage* will ultimately become inclusive, there is potential for closer scrutiny of *heterosexual marriage*. However, in the present corpus this label was primarily used to make a direct contrast with other relationships (including the terms *same-sex relationships* and *gay marriage*) and was associated with religious doctrine about sex outside of heterosexual marriage being a sin. There was also one other premodifier – *traditional marriage* (n = 611) – that piqued our interest but was not included here as it did not refer explicitly to sexuality. While it is possible that this label refers solely to highly gendered expectations of marriage and associated heteronormative ideals, it is possible that *traditional marriage* was used to express a form of implicit homophobia (c.f. van der Bom et al. 2015) to oppose the legalisation of same-sex marriage on grounds relating to biological parenthood and/or the privileging of

normative heterosexual sex (c.f. Paterson & Coffey-Glover 2018). Further analysis of this category label is thus warranted.

Focusing again on the four labels we considered in detail, there was no clear split in terms of the label chosen and the political leanings of different newspapers. There was a slight tendency for left-leaning publications to use *same-sex marriage* more, but all newspapers used both *gay marriage* and *same-sex marriage*. By contrast, *equal marriage* and *homosexual marriage* were used at a much lower rate, with *The People* not using these labels at all. As such, political affiliation did not appear to dictate which label a newspaper used. However, there was evidence that the tabloids (here classified as *Daily Mail*, *The Express*, *The Sun*, *The Mirror*, *The Star*, and *The People*) were, in the main, more likely to use *gay marriage* than the broadsheets. This perhaps raises questions about whether *gay marriage* was more colloquial or deemed more broadly understandable than *same-sex marriage*, which perhaps carried more formal connotations due to its use in legislation.

To respond directly to RQ2, each of the four labels we considered in detail was used slightly differently. *Same-sex marriage* was particularly associated with legal and political debates, politicking, and the formal procedures of legislation. It was also the official label endorsed by the UK government. Although similar in terms of use, *gay marriage* was associated with issues of morality, rather than procedure, and was the label most likely to be used in slippery slope metaphors and arguments evoking a moral panic. By far the label most associated with explicitly negative evaluation was *homosexual marriage*. Although it was the least frequent of the labels analysed here, and it appears to have fallen out of use in the mainstream UK press, the question remains as to whether this fall was due to changing attitudes about same-sex relationships and/or increased sensitivity to the use of language that may be exclusionary or othering to LGBTQ+ people.

Despite the differences noted above, there were similarities in terms of the arguments in which these labels were used, a finding which indicates the core components of same-sex marriage debates: religious arguments, the position of individual politicians, and legal debates. This is much in line with what has been found elsewhere in the literature (Findlay 2017, Paterson & Coffey Glover 2018, van der Bom et al. 2015, etc.). We also found that, overwhelmingly, the premodifiers were not directly challenged, and there was very little discussion about who different labels may have excluded (RQ3). It was only *equal marriage* that prompted discussions of inclusive terminology, with the acknowledgement that premodifiers such as *gay*, *same-sex*, and *transgender* are not equivalents.

We also note two particular limitations of our analysis. Firstly, our corpus only covers the first five years after the passing of the Marriage (same-sex couples) Act (2013). The trends noted above may change over time and different labels may come to the fore. As such, we see the benefit of repeating this analysis at a later date, perhaps in another ten years, as same-sex marriage becomes part of the status quo. Secondly, we acknowledge that our analysis has focused on just one term, *marriage*, yet there are a plethora of ways to index same-sex and indeed LGBTQ+ marriage, not least through references to spouses (*husband and husband*) and pronoun choice (*Wendy and their partner, my sister and her wife*) all of which mean our analysis, like any other, can only be partial. Thus, this paper is a push off point for the continued interrogation of the discourses surrounding marriage in all its forms in the twenty-first century.

We conclude by emphasising that, while more and more countries are passing same-sex marriage legislation, the debate about marriage rights is not over; there are still many countries where homosexuality is illegal and same-sex marriage is, for some, politically, religiously, and morally inconceivable. Changing the label for legal unions from *gay marriage* to *equal marriage* does not directly impact on the legal rights of those living in such countries, nor does it reflect the lived experiences of those who face persecution for their sexualities. As

such, we do not wish to overstate the case here. While we have shown that there is potentially a trend towards *equal marriage* in UK media discourse, this does not necessarily represent the shift in attitudes that MacCulloch (2018) presupposed. As such, while our analysis suggests a generally positive swing towards acknowledging the legitimacy of heterogenous adult relationships, we are aware that UK press' portrayal of same-sex marriage debates is only one component of a much wider issue.

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