Main Article

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Domesticating dating apps: Non-single Chinese gay men's dating app use and negotiations of relational boundaries

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Abstract

Dating app use is prevalent among non-single Chinese gay men. Applying domestication theory, this study explores how dating apps can be accepted in gay romantic relationships. The author argues that the domestication of technological artifacts unfolds on four dimensions: the *practical*, the *symbolic*, the *cognitive*, and the *relational*. Findings show that dating apps serve a dual role: a pool of sexual or romantic alternatives and a channel to the gay community. Although the former constitutes a threat to monogamy, the latter leaves room for a couple's negotiation for acceptable but restricted uses. This negotiation is in tandem with the negotiation of relational boundaries, which leads to either the reinforcement of monogamy or the embrace of non-monogamy. Meanwhile, one can perceive dating apps to be as unremarkable as other social media platforms. This is achieved through a cognitive process where gay men learn to debunk the arbitrary association between dating apps and infidelity. Monogamous or not, they put faith in user agency, not perceiving dating apps as a real threat to romantic relationships.

Keywords

dating apps, domestication theory, gay, monogamy, non-monogamy, romantic relationship, social media

Introduction

The day they moved in together, Patrick and Kevin, a young gay couple based in San Francisco, had a quarrel. Patrick found his partner using the dating app Grindr. He questioned why Kevin was on a "hook-up site". Kevin said he was just curious: "Who doesn't want to know what other homos are lurking in the shadows?" Their argument further

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unfolded around Kevin's infidelity in his previous relationship, the sexual boundaries of their relationship, and their difference in characters. Eventually, Patrick felt that their relationship would not work. Shortly thereafter they broke up.

This story comes from *Looking*, an American TV series. It carries multifold messages that resonate with the topic of this study. First, not every dating app user is single. Second, dating apps have a reputation as "hook-up apps," which suggests that many users, if not all of them, are looking for casual sex. These two messages together lead to the third: people may perceive dating apps as a threat to relationships.

Indeed, researchers have started to associate dating apps with infidelity. Studies based in Australia, Belgium, and the United States show that some non-single users have had extradyadic sexual or romantic encounters facilitated by dating apps (Hobbs et al., 2017; Timmermans et al., 2018; Weiser et al., 2018). Weiser et al. (2018) point out that individuals are using Tinder to facilitate infidelity, and their respondents overwhelmingly viewed Tinder as a method for engaging in infidelity. Timmermans et al. (2018) reveal a more complicated picture regarding non-single users' motives. They show that non-single Tinder users' motives are not limited to seeking short-term encounters; other motives include satisfying one's curiosity about the current dating market and estimating one's own value as a potential dating partner. But meanwhile, their findings imply that non-single users are less socially desirable in general—they have compared the personality traits of non-single users with those of partnered non-users and single users.

The above-mentioned studies have two main limitations. First, the definition of infidelity is based on the norms of monogamy, while the alternative definitions in non-monogamous relationships are excluded. Second, not distinguishing between heterosexual and non-heterosexual users, these studies shed little light on how non-single users' experience varies in line with their sexualities and the socio-cultural contexts they inhabit. Møller and Petersen (2017) have attended to both these aspects in their study. In the three British cases they present, non-monogamous gay men use dating apps for sexual or more intimate relations while still remaining within the negotiated boundaries of their relationships. This non-heteronormative perspective debunks the seemly natural association between dating apps, non-single users, and infidelity. Nevertheless, as it is focused on the sexual affordances of dating apps, this study downplays dating apps' less sexual roles. One of these roles is that dating apps afford a connection to gay communities for gay men, where they can express their gay identities and feel a sense of belonging (Castañeda, 2015). This affordance may even be enhanced in a country like China where the local dating apps have incorporated lots of design features from mainstream social networking sites (Wu and Ward, 2020), allowing users to follow each other and post textual or pictorial statuses (Figure 1). It would be reckless to assume that non-single gay users do not need this affordance. Like Kevin, the character in *Looking*, they can be as curious about the existence of other gay men as single users.

In the fieldwork I carried out in the past, I found that many gay men in China keep using dating apps (e.g. Aloha, Blued, Grindr, Jack'd, etc.) when they are in a romantic relationship. Questions remain to be answered: In what ways do non-single Chinese gay men use dating apps? If a gay couple can find an appropriate place for dating apps in their relationship, how do they achieve that? Do they opt for non-monogamy and embrace the sexual or romantic affordances of dating apps? If not, how do they mitigate the threat of sexual or romantic alternatives, symbolized by dating apps, to their relationship?

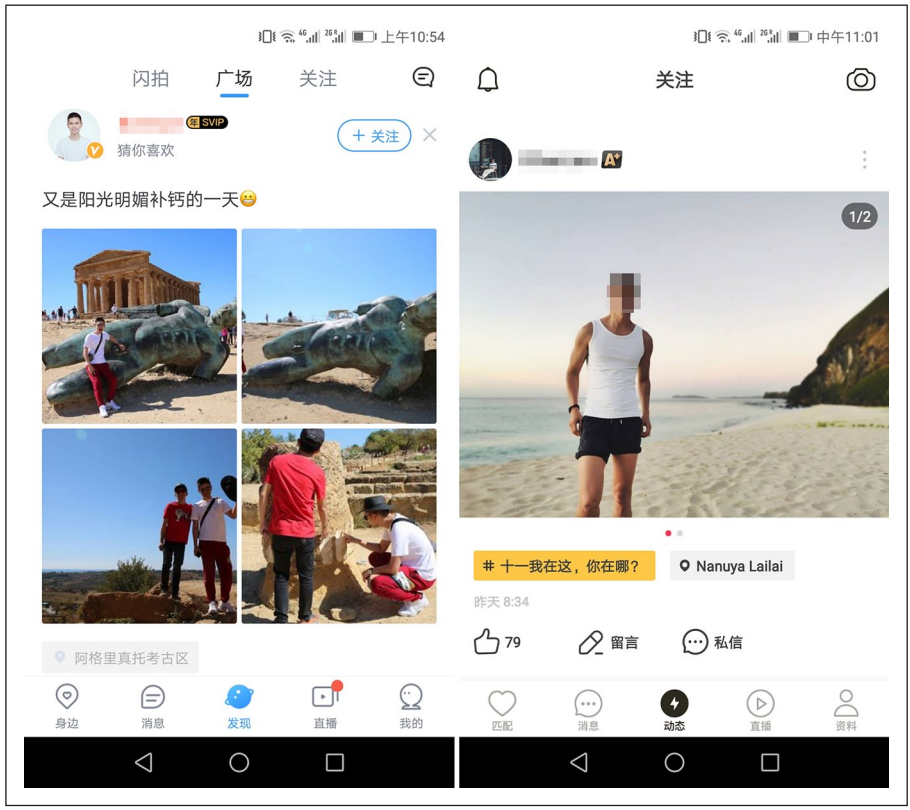

Figure 1. Displayed here are the social feeds on Blued (left) and Aloha (right), the most popular gay dating apps in China. Both apps allow users to post textual or pictorial statuses. Any other user can interact with these statuses.

These questions are linked to a larger question frequently posed by researchers: How do people accept new media technologies in their daily lives? To answer this question, many researchers adopt domestication theory, which examines how technology is incorporated into everyday life (Silverstone, 2006). As a metaphor, domestication refers to the process in which users turn new media technologies, which are strange and wild, into something familiar and tamed. It is a concept developed to describe and analyze the process of technology's acceptance, rejection, and use (Berker et al., 2006). Employing domestication theory, I paraphrase my questions in this way: How do Chinese gay men domesticate dating apps in romantic relationships? In the next section, I will provide a review of domestication theory and its application.

Domestication theory and its application

Researchers apply domestication theory in studies on how media technologies are integrated into users' daily routines, values, and environments (Berker et al., 2006). In the

early days, advocates of this theory mainly focused on media technologies in the household setting, such as televisions (Morley, 2006). This can be seen in how Silverstone et al. (1992) identify four phases of domestication: (a) appropriation, or bringing media technologies into the household; (b) objectification, or placing the physical artifacts in the space of home; (c) incorporation, or the injection of media technological practices into household members' routines of daily life; (d) conversion, or displaying media technologies and their meanings to the outside world.

Later on, researchers have extended domestication theory to examine media technologies' entering diverse consuming units, such as schools and workplaces. This theory is used in studies on portable devices that can easily cross the boundaries of different physical settings, with mobile phones being the most prominent case (Haddon, 2003). It is also used to study non-material or semi-material artifacts, such as computer software, TV programs, and so on (Silverstone et al., 1992). In the same vein, recent studies have paid attention to smartphone applications (de Reuver et al., 2016; Møller and Petersen, 2017).

Anticipating the generic potential of domestication theory, Sørensen and his colleagues argue that domestication invites a focus on three main dimensions: the *practical*, the *symbolic*, and the *cognitive* (Sørensen, 2006; Sørensen et al., 2000). First, domestication involves the construction of a set of practices related to an artifact on both the individual and the institutional levels. Second, there is also the construction of the meaning of the artifact. Third, domestication entails a cognitive process that pertains to learning about both the practical and the symbolic.

This tripartite framework is applicable to various settings where domestication takes place. Nevertheless, it lacks one essential dimension, which I call "the relational". The relational dimension is manifest in two ways. On the one hand, new media technologies pose challenges to the established ways in which people relate to each other, confronting existing social arrangements and cultural values (Silverstone, 2006). They may blur the boundaries of the existing relational categories with which we are familiar (Silverstone, 2006), causing conflicts among the members of the consuming unit they enter (Sørensen et al., 2000). That means domestication is never completed by one single person; it is achieved through the negotiation and coordination among members of the social relations influenced by new media technologies (Sørensen et al., 2000). Therefore, domestication studies must account for the negotiation and interaction among members of the consuming unit. Researchers should examine the members' conflicts and consensus, rules for technology use, and strategies for controlling both the use by others and the place of technologies in one's own life (Haddon, 2003). Certainly, some studies have paid attention to the control over technology uses, such as parental control (Lim, 2006). On the other hand, the relational arena itself is redefined to accommodate media technologies (Morley, 2006). Domestication researchers also probe the ways social life is (re)organized, along with possible shifts in social relations and their implications (Hartmann, 2013).

In light of the above, this study attends to four dimensions of domestication: the *practical*, the *symbolic*, the *cognitive*, and the *relational*. Specifically, I research why and how non-single Chinese gay men use dating apps, what symbolic meanings they and their partners associate with dating apps, what cognitive process they go through, and how gay couples negotiate rules of dating app use. As I understand domestication as an ongoing

process rather than a completed task (Haddon, 2003), I do not narrow my scope to successful cases where couples live in peace with dating apps. Instead, I am more interested in the efforts people have made to domesticate dating apps. Even if their relationships fail to survive in the struggles and conflicts related to dating apps, they may carry along their reflections into singlehood, which shapes their attitudes toward dating apps and their expectations for future relationships.

Method

The dataset of this study consists of 29 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with urban Chinese gay men. I recruited participants on two Chinese social media platforms, WeChat and Douban, with posts advertising my research project. All participants met at least one of the two following criteria: (a) the participant is currently having a romantic relationship in which at least one party is using any dating app; (b) the participant used to have a relationship in which at least one party was using any dating app. Participants contacted me through email or WeChat. They were living in major Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, etc. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 40 (mean = 25.3). All participants self-identified as gay.

I conducted all the interviews by online voice call via WeChat from September 2018 to March 2019. The length of interviews varied between 30 and 83 minutes (mean = 52.6). Interview questions were mainly about how dating apps were used, what dating apps meant to the participants, and how they negotiated rules of dating app use with their partners. To minimize potential harm to participants, I have assigned pseudonyms to all participants in this article. At the time of interviewing, 11 participants were single, and 18 were non-single. Among the non-single participants, five were in negotiated non-monogamous relationships, with two of them being a couple. They accepted extradyadic sex, but not extradyadic romantic involvement. I did not ask the non-single participants if I could invite their partners to take part in this research. They were candid about their experience, which convinced me that there was no need to get extra facts from their partners. Moreover, most of them told me some things that they had not told their partners. I was not sure if they would be comfortable with me interviewing their partners, or if I would accidentally leak to their partners some information that they only wanted to share with me. Nevertheless, I made an exception for one couple: Dongchen and Quan. Dongchen was the one who volunteered to be a participant. Some key information was missing in the interview with him, which could only be provided by Quan. Therefore, after explaining the potential risk to Dongchen and getting his approval, I conducted a separate interview with Quan. Due to ethical concerns, I did not share with them anything they told me individually.

Data analysis was inspired by the coding method widely applied in grounded theory research, which consists of three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Creswell, 2013). First, I closely read the transcripts and established preliminary codes. Then I explored the relations among these codes and grouped interrelated codes into larger categories. Finally, I associated these categories with the four dimensions of domestication: the *practical*, the *symbolic*, the *cognitive*, and the *relational*. I present the findings in three sections: (a) motives & uses; (b) negotiations & rules; (c) meanings &

agency. The first section is about the *practical*, revealing non-single users' motives and usage behaviors. The second section focuses on the *relational*, showing how gay couples negotiate over dating app use and their relational boundaries. The third section uncovers the *symbolic* meaning of dating apps and the *cognitive* process through which participants cognitively accept the role dating apps can play in romantic relationships.

Findings

Motives and uses: The dual role of dating apps

Before discussing motives and uses, it should be noted that media users do not always have concrete motives which they are able to articulate (Krcmar et al., 2016). Some participants said that using dating apps was simply a habit that formed when they were still single. Dating app use had become so habitual that some of them could not explain why. Chaiwei (24 years old), a lawyer, said that browsing profiles was his habitual action and he had no clear purpose in doing so. Rao (25), working in the health care industry, said he often opened dating apps "unconsciously".

That said, there are indeed many detectable motives. Participants reported a wide range of motives and uses, which were not always sexual or romantic. The specific motives and uses vary from person to person; one's motives and uses may also change. Nevertheless, these motives and uses generally construct a dual role of dating apps: a pool of sexual or romantic alternatives and a channel to the gay community.

Participants were aware that dating apps can function as a pool of sexual or romantic alternatives for their partners or themselves. They might use dating apps for hook-ups, sexting, or flirting. When their motives were romantic, they were often unsatisfied with their current relationships. Liu (28), a public relations practitioner, was unsatisfied in a previous relationship, as his partner refused to have any physical intimacy with him, such as kissing, hugging, and sex. Although he never used dating apps for hook-ups in that relationship, he used them to assess the chance of finding a new relationship. He said:

> If my test result on the market place had been that nobody liked me or wanted to talk to me, perhaps I would have stayed with this person even though there was no sex life. But when you are there [on dating apps], realizing that there are many people who you are interested in and who are interested in you as well, you will think: Why would you stick with the same person when there are so many possibilities? This is one of the factors that contributed to my breakup.

At the time of interviewing, Liu and his current boyfriend had been together for about 2 years. He stopped using dating apps in this relationship. His experience shows that dating app use fluctuates with the ebb and flow of the relationship.

However, sex and romance do not dictate all motives and uses. When dating apps function as a channel to the gay community, gay identity plays a significant role in users' experience. One common practice is simply browsing other users' profiles. This can break down into two subcategories which often co-exist: aesthetic browse and voyeuristic browse. Aesthetic browse means that users enjoy browsing the profiles of good-looking gay men. Quan (28), a bank clerk, often browsed profiles on the app Aloha which allowed users to follow each other. "It's simply a habit," said Quan. "Every morning

when I get up, I take a look at the things posted by those good-looking people." Quan sometimes shared these profiles with his boyfriend, and he was not the only participant to do so. Yangbin (40), working in international trade, would comment on some profiles in front of his boyfriend: "I would say to him: 'Look! Wow! This body looks good!' I would tell him I like this type." Both Quan and Yangbin reported having a stable and satisfying relationship. Sharing what they saw on dating apps had become part of the dynamic between them and their partners.

Different from aesthetic browse, voyeuristic browse is characterized by the pleasure of discovering the existence of other gay men. Songjia (29), a game developer, said he often browsed profiles together with his boyfriend out of curiosity. Shenlie (21), a university student, elaborated on this curiosity:

> Homosexuals are a minority. Minorities naturally have a motive of finding their own kind. Besides, there is a kind of curiosity, [a motive of] prying into other people's secrets. Sometimes on a dating app you may accidentally find that someone you know in real life turns out to be gay. If you can still hide your [gay] identity well after you know about him, [you] will have an inexplicable pleasure of knowing the cards in his hand.

Besides the familiar geographical setting where one may encounter someone he knows in real life, the unknown environment also stimulates curiosity. Many participants tended to browse profiles when they traveled to a new place. "Every time [you] go to a place, you're very curious about the distribution of gay men there," said Boshi (31), a PhD student. Similarly, Gaoxing (26), an HR professional, wanted to know who was nearby and if there were any good-looking guys. He stressed that it was not for hook-ups.

Curiosity can go deeper, as many participants said they also wanted to know what other gay men's lives were like. Jiemin (21), working at an LGBTQ NGO, was interested in what gay men are doing in their lives. Chenshi (20), a presentation designer, liked viewing posts on dating apps to see how other non-single gay users handle the tensions in their relationships. For Shenlie, the app Aloha allowed him to "pry into the lives of high-class gay men". He explained: "Compared to [the app] Blued, Aloha is relatively high-end. Users of it have higher educational and economic levels."

The curiosity about other gay men's existence and their lives distinguishes gay men's dating app use from that of the heterosexual users and can be seen as a form of attachment to the gay community. This attachment also includes the willingness to communicate with other gay men. Mingde (24), a product manager, used dating apps to make more gay friends: "There are many topics you can't talk about with your straight friends. I feel more comfortable and unrestrained when talking about these things with gay friends. We understand each other better." Dian (20), a university student, said dating apps are not necessarily for sex or intimate relationships. For him, they can simply be valued as a space where communication with others is easier, given the common gay identity of the users.

Given the attachment to the gay community, non-single gay users' looking around and making gay friends seem to be justifiable to their partners. The dual role of dating apps and the habitual use make the nature of dating app use ambiguous. Even to a monogamous relationship, dating apps are not necessarily a threat. However, gay couples still

need to negotiate the rules of dating app use in their relationships. The next section will be focused on negotiations and rules, which constitute the *relational* dimension of the domestication process.

Negotiations and rules: A mutual adaptation between apps and relationships

In monogamous relationships, dating apps' role as a channel to the gay community leaves room for users to negotiate with their partners about justifiable uses. In non-monogamous relationships, which are often referred to as "open relationships," it is also acceptable to exploit the sexual affordances of dating apps. In modern societies where monogamy is the default relationship script, an open relationship and corresponding dating app use are the results of negotiations. Monogamous or not, a gay couple need to negotiate the relational boundaries and the acceptable role(s) of dating apps.

According to my participants, it is rare for a couple to merely discuss dating app use itself. Discussions on dating apps are often in tandem with discussions on relational boundaries. Regarding the negotiations over relational boundaries and corresponding dating app use, there were three situations in general: (a) participants had no open discussions with their partners or preferred not to have; (b) discussions unfolded in a roundabout, indirect way; (c) discussions were open and direct.

No open discussions. Participants who had no open discussions about dating app use with their partners or preferred not to have such discussions were those who practiced monogamy. These participants include both users and (former) partners of users, except Liu, a non-user in his current relationship. Liu's boyfriend was also a non-user. Liu said: "For me, it relies on tacit understanding (默契). It's more about [me] observing what the other party does." In other words, this situation was achieved through "tacit coordination," in which the parties accommodate each other without a discussion (Pruitt and Carnevale, 1993).

Like Liu, the other participants tended not to discuss dating app use with their partners. These participants perceived the open discussion—mainly the inquiry into users' motives—to be "controlling". "Asking [about dating app use] is actually a form of interference. It will generate more problems that you're not able to solve," said Fangyuan (31), a creative branding practitioner. He stressed that he was not a control freak: "I hope there is a large free space in a couple's life and everything done (for each other) is voluntary." He further elaborated on this thought:

> Even if I choose to require, to force, or to do things like the binding or contractual negotiation, it can't prevent people from leaving you, be it your lover, your family, or friends. It can't guarantee the relationship will last forever.

Similarly, Gaoxing said he had no intention of controlling another person. For him, controlling is counterproductive. He said: "If you ask him not to use dating apps, he may feel more eager to use them. Everyone is more or less rebellious." Yangyang (24), a single PhD student, whose ex-boyfriend used dating apps frequently in their relationship, expected his future partner to delete dating apps voluntarily. He said: "I will definitely

not take the initiative to mention these things [about dating apps] in the beginning." While Yangyang perceived the deletion of dating apps as a step of making a commitment to the relationship, Gaoxing may disagree. In his last relationship, Gaoxing and his ex-boyfriend both kept using dating apps. He said:

> We both felt that asking each other to delete dating apps was being naive. Is that how you should maintain your relationship? By deleting [apps] and blocking potential hook-up buddies or potential romantic rivals? If you are so unconfident about the relationship that you have to feel safe by requiring your partner to delete the apps, then what's the point [of the relationship]? If you love each other enough, there won't be any problems even if he browses the app every day.

Overall, for the participants mentioned above, open discussion on dating app use is not necessary. A prerequisite is that both parties have no intention of challenging monogamy. Under this condition, participants could expect their partners to voluntarily conform to the norms of monogamy. The absence of negotiation is both a result and a reinforcement of monogamy.

Roundabout, indirect negotiations. The second situation is characterized by roundabout, indirect negotiations. It mainly includes two cases. The first case is that one tries to suggest the non-use of dating apps in a monogamous relationship. The second is that the couple try to transform their relationship into a non-monogamous relationship and accept the sexual affordances of dating apps.

In the first case, two factors contribute to the need for indirect negotiations. First, some users' partners are cautious of the sexual and romantic affordances of dating apps, but the legitimate community attachment undermines the "legitimacy" of asking their boyfriends to stop using the apps. Second, since interfering with the partner's dating app use can be seen as being controlling, there is a need to be strategic in negotiations so as not to tarnish one's own image.

Chaiwei experienced an indirect negotiation in a previous relationship. On one occasion, his then-boyfriend said to him: "Delete the things that should be deleted. You know it." When retelling these words, Chaiwei imitated the soft—nearly coquettish—tone of his ex-boyfriend. For Chaiwei, words like "things that should be deleted" were too vague and he did not know what they meant. "It was only when we broke up that he told me the breakup was because of the app. He said that 'things should be deleted' referred to dating apps. I said: 'Why didn't you say it explicitly?'" In hindsight, the vague words and the special tone were the strategies to soften the negotiation.

Others may take different strategies. Boshi witnessed how his partner took the initiative in deleting dating apps in his last relationship. "He said now we are officially together," said Boshi. "In front of me, and in a much ritualized way, he said: 'Look, I have deleted Jack'd.'" Boshi saw this as a hint that he himself should also delete the app, although he had already done so at that time. As Boshi understood, the equality rule should be automatically applied in this situation, even though his partner did not explicitly suggest deletion.

In Boshi's story, both parties were supposed to make equal concessions by quitting dating apps. Apart from equal concessions, however, the equality rule may also produce equal outcomes or benefits (Pruitt and Carnevale, 1993). Specifically, giving permissions to one's partner can be a strategy to negotiate for one's own benefits. This can be seen in the second case of indirect negotiations, where one tries to suggest non-monogamy. Quan and his boyfriend Dongchen (28), an urban planning consultant, were non-monogamous. They were living in different cities, with Quan in Beijing and Dongchen in Shenzhen. Dongchen was the one who proposed "being open" in the beginning. He said:

> I only had two bottom lines. One is safety, the other is [no] romantic [involvement]. I expressed my bottom lines to him in a joking way, and he definitely comprehended. I jokingly said to him: if you feel too sexually repressed in Beijing, you can absolutely find a 'little bottom' to play with. It's OK, as long as it is safe [sex] and there is no romantic involvement. In fact, the message I wanted to convey is that I might do it as well.

According to Dongchen, Quan's reaction was smiling shyly and changing the topic. In fact, this indirect negotiation took place many times and Quan never gave a clear answer to Dongchen. However, Quan told me he did take Dongchen's hint seriously. Quan said Dongchen was very serious when expressing the two bottom lines, which seems to be inconsistent with the joking way described by Dongchen himself. This means Quan had seen through Dongchen's strategy and received the coded message. Quan did not want to get engaged in this negotiation. He did not want to confirm that Dongchen had casual sex because he knew he would be jealous, even though he had extradyadic sex himself. Indeed, even in an open relationship, jealousy can exist. Jiangshan (30), a project leader of an LGBTQ NGO who was also in an open relationship, signed up for a new account on Blued where his regular account was followed by his boyfriend, so that the latter would not get jealous by seeing him being active on Blued.

Dongchen's strategy may not sound strange to other participants. Dasheng (23), a content moderator for a video website, understood this strategy. He said: "When you are saying these words to the other party, you are actually also excusing yourself. It's also for allowing yourself to do these things." Nevertheless, words that are similar to what Dongchen said to Quan may signify a totally different intention. As mentioned earlier, Chaiwei's ex-boyfriend tended to negotiate inexplicitly. Chaiwei said: "Once he asked me to remember to use condoms when playing outside." Although Chaiwei thought he was getting permission from his boyfriend, he did not respond. Instead, he smiled embarrassedly and let the topic slide, mirroring how Quan reacted to Dongchen. Later, they broke up because the ex-boyfriend found Chaiwei using dating apps for hook-ups. When breaking up, the ex-boyfriend said that Chaiwei totally misunderstood what he said; he was joking by saying those words, and his real intention was that Chaiwei would cherish him and voluntarily remain faithful. It seems that the ex-boyfriend was testing Chaiwei's faithfulness and also fishing for a certain answer. The answer he expected to hear was Chaiwei's reassurance of monogamous fidelity. The reason he chose indirect negotiation might be that he did not want to come across as controlling or paranoid to Chaiwei.

In short, negotiations over relational boundaries and dating app use tend to be roundabout and indirect when the norms are not so clear. However, when dating app use generates conflicts, the negotiations are often open and direct, as I will show in the next subsection.

Open, direct negotiations. When someone discovers that his partner is engaged in some unacceptable usage behaviors, there tends to be an open, direct negotiation. In his last relationship, Leng (22), a university student, directly questioned his boyfriend when he saw a sexually suggestive photo posted by the latter on Blued. A more dramatic story comes from Songjia and his current boyfriend. In this relationship, Songjia used to secretly hook up via Blued. One day he found that his boyfriend was also "cheating," which he deemed unacceptable. Then they had an open negotiation and agreed that they cannot accept non-monogamy. Based on that, they made some specific rules: they can only use dating apps for browsing and they cannot use the apps when one party is absent; they should delete the sexy photos they had posted.

On the other hand, even when no one is explicitly violating the norms, open negotiation can still happen if one party is really unhappy about dating app use. Jiawei (29), a security consultant, said that his boyfriend was very sensitive to dating app use at the beginning of their relationship, because he had encountered infidelity in his last relationship. So he and Jiawei had an open discussion. Jiawei convinced him that dating apps are not necessarily for hook-ups:

> The best example is that the whole process of how I got to know him, from chatting to arranging for an offline meeting, was completed on Blued. I said: I didn't ask you [on Blued] 'hi handsome, hook-up or not', right? I used myself as an example to persuade him.

Instead of setting up specific rules of dating app use, Jiawei and his boyfriend applied a more general rule: no hook-ups on dating apps. This rule reinforced their belief in monogamy.

Overall, by negotiating dating app use, gay couples set boundaries for their relationships. While they can choose to adjust their usage behaviors, they can also choose to challenge the monogamous relationship script. In this sense, the domestication of dating apps is a process where dating app use and the relationship mutually adapt to each other. Meanwhile, gay men also gain a sense of control in the domestication process, realizing their own agency when facing the seemingly ubiquitous dating apps that are hard to get rid of. In the next section, I will show how gay men construct an unremarkable image of dating apps at the *symbolic* level through *cognitive* work.

Meanings and agency: Constructing an unremarkable image of dating apps

All participants were aware of dating apps' sexual and romantic affordances which they needed to negotiate cognitively. During the interviews, they constructed an unremarkable image of dating apps with their own narratives. When doing so, they made three points. First, dating apps can function as ordinary social media. Second, dating apps are

not the only place where sexual or romantic rivals exist. Third, user agency is the shield for relationships.

The first point is reflected in an analogy between dating apps and other social media platforms. For Songjia, browsing on dating apps was just like browsing on Tumblr. Zheren (25), a content operator, said he was just looking around on dating apps, as he did on TikTok and Weibo. Similarly, Yangbin said Blued is just as much a social platform as Weibo is.

The second point often goes hand in hand with the third one. As Fangyuan said:

> If he has the propensity [to cheat], he can't be stopped, using dating apps or not. Like I said, he can cheat with someone he knows from real life. It may also happen through QQ groups or websites. I think if he wants, any platform can offer him the chance and the channel.

Echoing Fangyuan's words, Gaoxing said: "If he intends to break up with you, or if he intends to hook up, he can still find someone and achieve it even after deleting the apps." Similarly, Leng said: "Without the apps, you can still meet other people in other places, either on Douban or in a bar." Interestingly, what they said blurred not only the boundaries between dating apps and other social media, but also the boundaries between the apps and the offline world. This indicates that participants had taken dating apps for granted.

Meanwhile, participants expressed that it depends on users themselves whether dating apps' role as a pool of sexual or romantic alternatives is activated. When single participants reflected on their previous relationships where dating apps were involved, and when non-single participants talked about how satisfied they were with their current relationships to which dating apps are unlikely to pose threat, they were mainly analyzing their (former) partners and themselves. Talking about mental states, personalities, childhood experiences, and social backgrounds, they acted like sociologists or psychologists. Just like some researchers I have cited in this article, they tried to figure out the personality traits that may predict infidelity in dating app use. For instance, Fangyuan analyzed why his ex-boyfriend was addicted to browsing on dating apps:

> He was younger than me. In 2014 I was 27 years old, and he was 23. He was from a northwestern city, which is not a provincial capital or a city with a very big population. [Because of] the young age and restrained by the environment where he grew up, he might have a higher demand for more knowledge about the [gay] group or for the sense of self-identity. So he might have more demand for knowing and communicating with this group.

Another example is Dongchen's explanation for why Quan would not quit their relationship for someone he met on dating apps. Dongchen said:

> He thought he would never meet someone else whose conditions are similar to mine, who thinks highly of him and is willing to be together with him. [. . .] He took the initiative to hit on me, but he procrastinated when it came to further steps. In the end, I proposed to be together. It was partly because he used to be unconfident about his family conditions, educational background, and material base.

These seemingly sociological or psychological analyses can be seen as a strategy to relieve the relationship uncertainty induced by dating apps. Learning to shift the focus from dating apps to one's social background and mental state is part of the cognitive process participants went through in domestication. Accordingly, many participants said their attitudes toward dating apps had changed as they became more experienced in relationships. Leng said he used to regard dating apps simply as matchmaking tools, but he gradually realized that not everyone thinks about them that way. Although he still held a grudge against his first boyfriend who was an active user, he said it was not about dating apps themselves. "It's because I knew his mental state," said Leng. "What I minded was not dating apps, but his intention of using dating apps." Having learned that the motives of dating app use can be very diverse, he became more tolerant of the apps in his later relationships.

On the other hand, active users themselves also need to learn to live with the abundant sexual or romantic alternatives made available by dating apps. For those who are not satisfied with their current relationships, abundant alternatives are good opportunities. For those who do not intend to leave their partners, dating apps offer temptations. When facing temptations, participants reported three options: being self-disciplined, violating the norms secretly, and negotiating for new relational boundaries ("going open"). No matter what they opted for, the domestication of dating apps required them to negotiate the relationship norms, as well as their own thoughts on love and sex. Boshi was very familiar with this inner negotiation. When his 5-year relationship turned into a long-distance relationship as he moved to Shanghai alone, he violated the norm by using dating apps to hook up. Even though he easily found a sexual partner, he did not feel hopeful about finding a new relationship. He elaborated on his inner negotiation:

> Now that sex has become extremely easy to obtain, a relationship is still uneasy—or even more difficult—to obtain. [. . .] Now since [sex] is so easy to obtain, you are forced to—and you have to—accept the reality. You may need to be more tolerant of extra-relational sex. Otherwise, you will be very disappointed if you require yourself or the other party to meet the ideal standard.

Boshi saw how dating apps, perhaps together with other media platforms, bring changes to the social environment. As he said, when the environment has changed, inhabitants need to make adjustments. That is also evidence of human agency. Indeed, Boshi and many other participants anchored their hope on human agency when facing the challenges posed by dating apps. This act itself is part of the agency and is key to the domestication of dating apps.

Conclusion

Applying domestication theory, I have examined how Chinese gay men naturalize dating app use in romantic relationships. I have extended a tripartite framework of domestication theory (Sørensen, 2006), which includes the *practical*, the *symbolic*, and the *cognitive* dimensions, by adding the *relational* dimension.[1] New media technologies challenge the established ways people relate to each other, confront old social arrangements and

values, and blur the boundaries of existing relational categories. Therefore, the domestication of new media technologies inevitably entails a relational dimension that is embodied in the negotiation and coordination among members of social relations. Addressing the mutual adaption between social relations and new media technologies, the relational dimension is brought up to (re)establish the significant role that social relations play in the understanding, appropriation, incorporation, and sometimes the rejection of technological artifacts.

This study shows how the domestication of dating apps in Chinese gay men's romantic relationships unfolds on the above-mentioned four dimensions. *Practically*, non-single users' various motives and uses construct dating apps' dual role as a pool of sexual or romantic alternatives and a channel to the gay community. Although the former may pose a threat to romantic relationships, the latter leaves room for the negotiation between the couple for acceptable but restricted usage. Monogamous couples may manage to deactivate dating apps' sexual or romantic role and retain their communal role. The fact that dating apps assume an important communal role implies Chinese gay men's reliance on digital platforms for connecting to their community. Enhanced by the comprehensive functionalities of local dating apps, this reliance may be a consequence of the Chinese LGBTQ community's limited visibility either in the offline world or in the mainstream media, which is caused by the restrictions on bottom-up social movements and the censorship on media content (Ho, 2010; Leung, 2017).

Despite dating apps' dual role in actual practices, domestication on the *symbolic* dimension entails monogamous couples' intentional construction of an unremarkable image of dating apps. Monogamous Chinese gay men achieve that by perceiving dating apps to be as unremarkable as other social media platforms and putting their faith in user agency. This often involves a *cognitive* process whereby they learn to analyze the relationship experience of themselves or others, with their perspectives often being sociological or psychological, and debunk the arbitrary association between dating apps and infidelity. However, they may also go through another cognitive process in which they gradually embrace the notion of non-monogamy, accepting the sexual or even the romantic affordances of dating apps. In that case, they are even less likely to attach negative symbolic meanings to dating apps and regard dating apps as a threat.

Since the symbolic and the cognitive work is a constant process across different life phases, even single gay men may contemplate how they should deal with dating apps in future relationships. However, when domestication takes place in a relationship, the *relational* dimension becomes especially relevant. Embedded in relational dynamics, domestication is achieved through negotiations of relationship members and much defined by available relationship scripts. When negotiating over the uses of communication technologies, relationship members are also negotiating the relational boundaries and norms. For gay couples, the domestication of dating apps can result in either the reinforcement of monogamy or the embrace of non-monogamy.

Although non-monogamous gay partnerships had existed for long before the arrival of dating apps (Jamieson, 2004; Shernoff, 2006), it would not be surprising if the abundant sexual and romantic alternatives, made available by media platforms such as dating apps, prompt more and more gay men to consider non-monogamy. Notably, bountiful

opportunities of extradyadic sex offered by dating apps to metropolitan gay men are shaking the monogamous beliefs inherited, though not without changes, from a historical era when sex was never so available as it is now. The alternative non-monogamous scripts of intimate relationships, even if not adopted, are debated by and known to more and more people, given full consideration by many couples, and granted more legitimacy in society.

Monogamous or not, Chinese gay couples often believe that boundaries should be negotiated, not imposed. Autonomy and self-discipline are highly valued and regarded as the cornerstone for the operation of a relationship. It is the love of a free subject who voluntarily restricts his freedom for a romantic relationship that is seen as true love (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Based on this, Chinese gay men tend to avoid a deterministic view regarding dating apps' influence on romantic relationships. Knowing that they cannot control their partners' usage behaviors, Chinese gay men choose to believe in user agency, which also means that they expect their partners to be self-disciplined. If the partners fail, it means that they have some "personality flaws" and are thus not desirable. If they are reluctant to make a commitment to the relationships in either monogamous or non-monogamous sense, then they lack an authentic feeling for their boyfriends, which should be the very basis of a desirable relationship. In either case, the relationship is just not "right" and should be brought to an end, with dating apps not being held accountable.

Although this study is focused on the domestication of dating apps in romantic relationships, it should be noted that individuals are situated in multiple social relations. Apart from romantic relationships, we should also take into account other relational contexts if we aim for a comprehensive understanding of the relational dimension in gay men's negotiation of dating app use. For instance, many gay users have concerns about self-disclosure on a dating app. One may feel reluctant to reveal his gay identity to other users in his neighborhood; some do not want to be seen on a "hook-up app" by their acquaintances (Blackwell et al., 2015). Therefore, even a single gay user will need to navigate the relational dimension of dating apps.

Finally, one point regarding the domestication theory can be taken further. Previously domesticated media platforms need to be re-domesticated when entering a new relational context. As revealed in this study, gay users need to re-negotiate their usage behaviors and the meanings of dating apps when they finish singlehood. Similarly, other platforms as individual and mobile as dating apps may also go through a re-domestication process when they are carried along into a newly established relationship. Researchers may further explore this process in future studies.

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Note

1. One may argue that the relational dimension is in fact part of the symbolic dimension, as Sørensen et al. (2000: 167) argue that the meaning of an artifact is given "within the household or a similar local context of identity". In other words, it is in relational contexts that artifacts are assigned meaning. Nevertheless, conflating the relational with the symbolic would be underestimating the significance of the relational itself, which does not simply serve as a background of symbolic domestication. By seeing the relational as a distinguishable dimension, researchers would give adequate attention to the dynamic within a social relation that influences and is susceptible to the domestication of an artifact.

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