BEYOND CASUAL SEX

Dating Apps and the Reformation of Gay Relationships in China

Shangwei Wu

Beyond Casual Sex

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Beyond Casual Sex

Dating Apps and the Reformation of Gay Relationships in China

Meer dan losse seks

Datingapps en de hervorming van homorelaties in China

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Doctoral Committee:

Promotor: Prof. dr. M.S.S.E. Janssen

Other members: Prof. dr. P. Arora
Prof. dr. B.J. de Kloet
Dr. J. Birnholtz

Copromotor: Dr. D. Trottier

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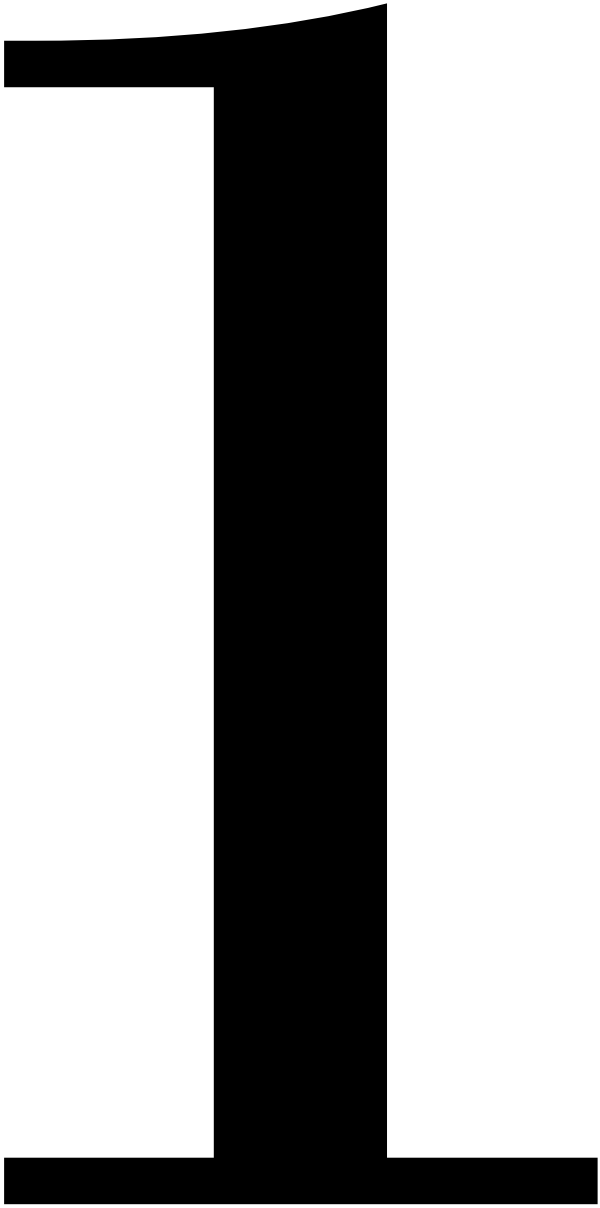


Chapter 1

Introduction: A Mediation Perspective

Back in 2015, when I was still doing a Master's program at Renmin University of China in Beijing, I saw the advertisement for a PhD project, Self-Presentation and Computer-Mediated Communication on Matchmaking Mobile Applications, at Erasmus University Rotterdam. As a user of matchmaking mobile applications, or "dating apps", I immediately found it interesting. I envisioned that the relevance of dating app studies was far beyond the current scope of this project. As I expressed in my first correspondence with the project supervisor, I wanted to explore how dating apps influence the human condition, as well as my own life.[1]

Human condition. Such grand words embarrass me so much today, but they did not come out of nowhere. They were rooted in my anxiety about the intimate connection between gay men, which I believed was precarious in the rise of dating apps. Earlier that year, I met a Turkish expatriate on Grindr, perhaps the most globally famous gay dating app. Shortly after we started dating, through his ex-boyfriend I got to know he was a "regular cheater". Although I could not prove he had cheated on me as well, he remained active on several dating apps indeed. The doubt and sense of insecurity stayed with me throughout this five-month relationship. When I became single again, I wished to find a new relationship soon, to turn the page. However, things were not easy. It seemed ironic to me that with so many people out there on the dating apps, I could not find the right person. Maybe it was because of the abundant options that people become less willing to settle down? In my mind formed the idea that dating apps sabotage intimacy: they make commitment difficult and infidelity easy.

My mind has changed a lot after studying dating apps for nearly four years. I have gained a better understanding of my frustrating love life by exploring my peers' dating experiences, discerning the patterns in them, and fitting myself into the group picture. The question about dating apps' influence on the human condition, however, has become more difficult for me to answer. As I gradually get familiar with the long-lasting academic discussions on the relationship between communication technologies and society, I become reluctant to make theoretical assumptions about causality and imagine a decisive role of communication

1 This chapter contains a literature review that has been published as Wu, S., & Ward, J. (2018). The mediation of gay men's lives: A review on gay dating app studies. *Sociology Compass*, *12*(2), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12560

technologies in society. Instead of seeing dating apps as a Pandora's box, I realize that what I experienced was *moral panic*, the fear of moral decline stirred up by new media when we try to understand its implications (Baym, 2015).

Nevertheless, the vague question about human condition was helpful. It steered me to scholarly work aimed at understanding the complex dynamic between communication technologies and society, a specialized research field where I knew my work should be rooted. Diving into this field, I found the framework of *mediation* proposed by Lievrouw (2014), which then largely shaped my research questions and the final structure of this thesis. In the next section, I will elaborate on this framework and contextualize it by briefly reviewing the main perspectives that exist in the field of communication technology studies.

Mediation: Among the Perspectives in Communication Technology Studies

Researchers have categorized the array of thoughts people may have when trying to understand the consequences of new media into three perspectives: technological determinism, the social construction of technology, and mutual shaping (Baym, 2015; Lievrouw, 2014).

People who take the perspective of technological determinism tend to view technologies as casual agents that enter our societies as active forces of either positive or negative change which we have little power to resist, especially when technologies are new (Baym, 2015). For instance, the moral panic that I experienced in 2015 when I still saw dating apps as something new—I only started using dating apps in 2014—was a form of determinism. The fear I had for the "endangered" intimate relationships was much older than dating apps themselves, as it appeared among some worriers in the rise of the telephone (Fischer, 1992), the television (Baym, 2015), and then the internet (J. Q. Anderson, 2005).

The second perspective, the social construction of technology (SCOT), rejects the deterministic view by emphasizing that technologies are invented and used by human beings and thus socially constructed (Baym, 2015). SCOT scholars

focus on how inventers, investors and regulators, who are influenced by social contexts themselves, shape the technology, as well as how the manner in which users take up and use media is affected by a wide range of social, economic, governmental, and cultural factors (Baym, 2015). Their constructivist views sometimes can be so radical that technologies may be seen as solely the product of socially negotiated meanings and constructs (Lievrouw, 2014).

Over time, more and more researchers adopt the third perspective, a more dialectical and mutual-shaping perspective that emphasizes the middle ground. From this perspective, as Baym (2015, p. 52) argues, "we need to consider how society circumstances give rise to technologies, what specific possibilities and constraints technologies offer, and actual practices of use as those possibilities and constraints are taken up, rejected, and reworked in everyday life." Accordingly, technological objects themselves receive more attention than they do from the SCOT scholars, although not as much as from the holders of deterministic views. Materiality has become a keyword for understanding the affordances of technologies, as scholars are taking the physical, material nature of the technological artefacts, which invite actors to use them in particular ways, as seriously as they do its social construction (Lievrouw, 2014).

It is against this backdrop that Lievrouw (2014) proposed the mediation framework, attending to both the social and material character of communication technologies. According to her, communication technology infrastructures consist of three components, namely, (a) artefacts, devices or objects with certain technological and material features, used by people to communicate with each other; (b) practices, how people engage in communication with devices; and (c) social arrangements, social relations, institutions, and structures that not only organize and govern but also form and develop around communication technologies and practices. These three components are in a constant state of flux. Lievrouw identifies three corresponding modes of change, which are respectively called *reconfiguration* of artefacts, *remediation* of practices, and *reformation* of social arrangements. The "ongoing, articulated, and mutually determining relationship among [the] three components of communication technology infrastructure and [their] three corresponding processes or modes of change" (Lievrouw, 2014, p. 45) is understood as mediation. She elaborates on this:

Artefacts—material devices and objects—enable, extend, or constrain people's abilities to communicate, and develop through a process of reconfiguration. People engage in communicative practices or action, some of which may employ those devices; practices change in an ongoing process of remediation of interaction, expression, and cultural works. Social arrangements—patterns of relations, organizing, and institutional structure—form and develop in concert with the artefacts and practices through a process of reformation (Lievrouw, 2014. p. 45).

When I read about this framework, I saw its association with my ambition of capturing the possible transformation in gay men's social relationships facilitated by dating apps. Therefore, before I started my empirical studies, I applied this framework to the literature I read on gay dating apps, trying to identify what had been found and what remained to be discovered in the mediation process that implicates dating apps and gay men's social connection to each other. I will share my findings in the next three sections, which respectively correspond to the themes of artefacts, practices, and social arrangements.

Gay Dating Apps and Their Reconfiguration

Dating apps have become globally popular in the last decade. Running on smartphones and working with GPS, dating apps connect users to others who are either in close geographic proximity or half a world away, affording both synchronous and asynchronous communication. These apps allow users to create profiles to present themselves and interact with each other for a wide array of motives, such as casual sex, relationship seeking, or simply socializing (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Unlike traditional dating websites accessed through computers, dating apps seem to shorten the time span between the initial online contact and the offline meeting (Chan, 2017); unlike mainstream social networking platforms such as Facebook and WeChat, dating apps mainly bring strangers together.

Gay men can use either mainstream dating apps where heterosexual users outnumber LGBTQ users, such as Tinder, or the apps targeted at gay men—or more broadly, men who have sex with men (MSM)—such as Grindr. It is not

uncommon for gay men to use several dating apps at the same time (MacKee, 2016). For Chinese gay men, at least the tech-savvy ones, the options are even doubled. As I will show in Chapter 5, although China's "Great Firewall" has limited the Internet connection to foreign dating apps like Grindr and Tinder, these apps are still quite popular among metropolitan users who use a virtual private network (VPN) to climb the firewall. Meanwhile, local apps thrive in the safe haven protected by the "Great Firewall". Blued, for instance, has more than 40 million registered users worldwide, approximately 70% of whom are from China (Cao, 2018). In China alone, Blued has more than 3 million daily active users (Hernández, 2016), rivalling Grindr's global popularity (Avery, 2019). Aloha is another MSM-targeted app that is popular among Chinese gay men. Meanwhile, mainstream Chinese dating apps like Tantan have also find their place in the gay community.

As dating apps are constantly being *reconfigured* through updates, a regular user can always see changes in the design features of the apps. Nevertheless, the basic structures often remain the same: they define dating apps as a location-based service connecting strangers in geographic proximity and have existed from the very beginning. The forms they take can effectively be categorized into two types. One type allows the user to start a conversation by private messaging with any user displayed on the screen. Apps of this type often have a grid view or a list view, presenting a range of nearby users' profiles in descending order of geographic proximity. This type includes the most popular MSM-targeted apps, such as Grindr and Blued[2]. The other type entails a mechanism of signaling and matching, as private messaging is possible only when both users signal their interest. Representatives of this type are Tinder and Aloha, which present one single profile at a time. Users need to swipe left or right on the profile to signal their dis/interest in establishing a connection.

As a researcher and user of dating apps myself, I have noticed the convergence of these two forms on some apps in their reconfigurations. In 2017, Grindr added the functionality of sending a "tap"—"looking", "hot", or "friendly"—that is officially framed as an icebreaking move (Mulkerin, 2017; *What Are Taps?*, n.d.).

2 Blued was initially built as a replica of Jack'd, a Western MSM-targeted app (Miao & Chan, 2020). Aloha, another Chinese app, was probably inspired by the Western app Tinder. Interestingly, neither of these two Chinese apps have Chinese names.

By sending a tap, one can signal his interest and see if it is reciprocated. Like me, users who are afraid of the blunt rejection in private messaging, which often takes the form of not replying, may feel more comfortable with tapping first. In another case, 9monster, an MSM-targeted app that is popular in Japan, has both the Grindr-like and Tinder-like browsing interfaces. One can either directly send a private message to someone nearby or get a match first by swiping.

Reconfiguration can go much further than the above-mentioned convergence. This is quite obvious in the Chinese context. Different from their Western equivalents, Blued and Aloha have gradually integrated many functionalities of mainstream social media, allowing users to post status updates, follow each other, react to content, and so on. Moreover, both of them have launched a live streaming function that is not geographically bound. A popular live streamer may have tens of thousands of viewers from all over China (Wang, 2020). For Blued, live streaming has even become the most profitable division of their core business (Miao & Chan, 2020). Overall, the efforts of Chinese dating apps to position themselves as multifunctional social services rather than "hook-up apps" result from coalescences of multiple social factors: (a) visions of the companies for the roles of dating apps in complex social relations, (b) the capital market that drives app companies to monetize user-generated content, and, perhaps the most of all, (c) the internet regulations and content censorship set up by the Chinese government (Liu, 2016; Miao & Chan, 2020; Wang, 2019a).

Gay Social Practices and Their Remediation

Many gay dating app researchers are interested in how dating apps, playing on the existing social norms within certain cultural contexts, shape gay men's online social practices. They examine how gay men actually use dating apps and what the technology affords. In this section, I focus on the one-on-one interaction between individual users that may eventually lead to intimacy, excluding the one-to-many live streaming on Chinese dating apps. I present the studies that examine the multiple incentives for gay men to use dating apps and then those on users' self-presentation and interaction on MSM-targeted dating apps.

The design of gay dating apps allows users to express various expectations and engage in a variety of practices. Dating app profiles have checkboxes that allow people to communicate multiple goals. For example, on Grindr, users can tick more than one "looking-for" checkbox among options such as "chat", "dates", "friends", "networking", "relationship", and "[sex] right now". Options on other dating apps are similar. Indeed, the ways of using dating apps are diversified by users' multi-identities and social backgrounds. In their study of gay immigrants' use of social media in Belgium, including dating apps, Dhoest and Szulc (2016) summarize the relevant factors for gay immigrants, including (a) the degree of "outness" in real life, (b) the social and/or economic dependence on family and members from the ethno-cultural community, (c) economic self-sufficiency, (d) linguistic proficiency and literacy (to communicate on social media), (e) a sense of safety and security, and (f) internet access. Given the variety of users' backgrounds, practices which are not specifically intended by designers are also afforded by dating apps and carried out by users. Shield (2017) argues that immigrants to Copenhagen use dating app profiles to develop social networks to adapt to local life, and chats on dating apps are a useful way to initially engage with local gay residents. Many dating apps allow users to browse profiles in foreign countries, and some potential immigrants take advantage of this feature before they actually move to their destination. After learning local information about a host country through dating app profiles, including the subcultures of that host country, they re-evaluate their decision to move. Stempfhuber and Liegl (2016) note that the use of dating apps transforms travelers' experiences. Dating apps do so by helping travelers to observe and make sense of the strange surroundings by browsing local users' profiles. Travelers are thus able to orient themselves in unfamiliar local contexts. Similarly, for urban residents, a dating app "is often used as a mapping device for the reading of urban space" (Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016, p. 65).

Researchers deliberately situate their examination of gay men's practices in a socio-technical context, paying careful attention to the technical attributes of dating apps. Inevitably, comparisons are made in different ways. On the one hand, practices on dating apps are compared to those in real life, or to an era when dating apps had not yet been invented. Hooking up on dating apps, which is different from cruising in a physical space, provides gay men with greater control in releasing or gathering information, such as HIV status (Race, 2015a).

On the other hand, the understanding of these technical attributes does not start from scratch, and the design and functionalities of dating apps are often compared to those of online gay venues accessed with computers, including chat rooms or dating sites. Studies therefore highlight the new affordances of dating apps. For instance, traditional dating sites are said to focus on meeting people in a general area and may involve weeks or months of online communication before a date, while the "location-based real-time dating applications" facilitate local, immediate social or sexual encounters (Blackwell et al., 2015). Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott (2015) frame Grindr as a "co-situation technology" that causes "context collapse" by bringing users with different intentions from different social groups into a single online setting in ways that transcend geographic boundaries. Because the contexts that help people discern what constitutes normative behavior collapse on dating apps, users rely heavily on self-presentation and interaction to communicate their identities and intentions. Thus, self-presentation and interaction are two main aspects of the remediation of gay men's online dating practices. Next, I offer an overview of findings about self-presentation and interaction.

Self-Presentation in Profiles

Gay dating app users experience tension: On the one hand, they aim to self-disclose in ways that result in a positive perception from other users; on the other hand, they do not want to reveal too much identify information. Users develop a set of strategies to signal their intentions and make themselves attractive. In virtual space on dating apps where identification cues are limited, users find their own way to re-insert identification information to gain social attraction. For instance, Grindr shows only distance information for nearby users and erases location details. Thus, in their profiles, some users input the name of socially defined spaces that they identify with, such as neighborhoods, city names or institutions. They associate themselves with these landmarks to make themselves more socially attractive (Birnholtz et al., 2014).

At the same time, users need to manage the possibility of exposing identifying information. There are several possible cases. First, some users are reluctant to reveal their gay identity to others. Second, some people are comfortable with others' being aware of their sexual preferences, but they still feel a need to separate their different roles in online and offline settings. For instance,

teachers may not want to be seen by their students on dating apps. Thus, on dating apps, people may want to avoid interaction with offline acquaintances. Finally, sex-related stigma attached to dating apps can cause stress (Blackwell et al., 2015). Users carefully present themselves as not looking for casual sex to circumvent the stigma, and even those who seek causal sexual encounters tend to use euphemistic terms or abbreviations, such as "fun" for sex and "nsa" for "no strings attached" in English-speaking environment (Birnholtz et al., 2014). To hide their identity, users may use profile pictures that do not reveal their face (Blackwell et al., 2015).

Some patterns of textual and visual self-presentation are outlined in quantitative research studies. For instance, in the United States, older users and those who share race are less likely to disclose their faces. In contrast, higher body mass index (BMI) users, users who disclose relationship status, and those who seek friends or relationships are more likely to show their faces on a dating app (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015). Compared to Americans, gay dating app users in China are less likely to show their faces or mention their goals, and more Chinese users mention seeking relationships than American users (Chan, 2016).

However, photos and profiles are not always reliable indicators of others' intentions. Users' actual behaviors do not always match what they say in their profiles, and users do not always update their profiles after their intentions change (Blackwell et al., 2015). In private interaction, users may provide more personal information about themselves.

Interaction Through Private Chat

In private chat on dating apps, users are still trying to positively present themselves and signal their intentions while simultaneously discerning others' intentions. Given that prior work has largely focused on self-presentation in profiles, Fitzpatrick and Birnholtz (2018) argue that researchers should pay more attention to interactions on dating apps. Accordingly, they have explored how Grindr users negotiate their goals in different stages. First, profile functions as an initial negotiation. When constructing their profiles, people think less "about lying or being lied to and more about how much to reveal about their goals and when in the process to reveal this information" (Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018, p. 2481). Given that goals can vary with time, stating a specific goal in one's

profile makes it difficult to withdraw this information later, and retaining some ambiguity means leaving room to maneuver in the interaction. Second, chat on dating apps functions as strategic, interactive self-presentation. Users may negotiate their goals in the chat, and the timing of another user's reply, whether it is immediate or delayed, may change the flow of the chat and alter previous expectations. Third, face-to-face meetings, facilitated by interaction on dating apps, is another stage of negotiation, where users either verify or overturn the prior, online impression they had of another dating app user.

In a more specific case, Licoppe, Rivière and Morel (2015) explore how Grindr users in France who seek casual sexual encounters use interaction strategies to circumvent relational development. As they argue (Licoppe et al., 2015, p. 2549):

Grindr users have evolved a particular "linguistic ideology" (Silverstein, 1979) which provides them with an ideal type of what an ordinary "friendly conversation is about (relational development), of what kind of conversational practices support such an orientation (mentioning personal events as topics) and which they reject as unsuitable to their own interactional purposes.

With a checklist in mind regarding what to ask step by step, users routinize the chat and follow the "matching sequences" (Licoppe et al., 2015, p. 2556). This allows users to avoid referring to personal issues and biographical detail that could lead to more social and emotional involvement. After interviewing Grindr users and analyzing the chat history they provided, Licoppe and his colleagues observed three aspects of checklist-style talk. First, users ask and answer questions in a way such that information is made explicit and brief, such as pictures, location, and immediate goals. Second, questions in the beginning may be raised rapidly one after another, leaving the interrogee little time to reply to each in turn. Third, information such as pictures and locations may be sent voluntarily to encourage reciprocity.

Before I end this remediation section, it should be noted that there seems to be a divergence between the hidden MSM, those who want to conceal their sexualities or who do not self-identify as gay, and the open MSM. Compared to open MSM, hidden MSM are more reluctant to post recognizable profile

pictures, and less frequently use online dating platforms for non-sexual purposes. They prefer online dating platforms to offline gay venues like gay bars or clubs (Lemke & Weber, 2017). In the transition of cruising from physical venues to dating apps, hidden MSM tend to feel an anxiety that they are at a bigger risk of exposure on dating apps than in physical cruising venues, as shown in McGuire's (2018) study based in Seoul.

In addition to detailing the remediation of gay men's online dating practices, gay dating app research also contributes to understanding the reformation of social arrangements around gay sociality. In the following section, I detail two themes in regard to social arrangements, namely, gay communities in digital era and new forms of social relations.

Gay Social Arrangements and Their Reformation

Social arrangements, such as patterns of relations, organizing, and institutional structure, respond and adapt to available systems and devices and to communicative practices, in a process of reformation (Lievrouw, 2014). In gay dating app studies, researchers have been interested in the reformation of gay men's relationships to each other in gay communities. This academic interest is inherited from the long-running debate about gay communities in the digital era. The concept of "gay community" has been especially of interest to HIV prevention researchers, because gay communities have played an important role in HIV prevention work, such as disseminating knowledge of safe sex (Holt, 2011). The prevalence of the internet and digital devices, making gay community attachment less necessary for gay men to socialize with each other, has triggered the debate on whether gay communities are declining (Holt, 2011; Rosser et al., 2008; Rowe & Dowsett, 2008; Zablotska et al., 2012). Arguing against the nostalgic, monolithic and metropolitan-centric view on the fate of gay communities, Davis and his colleagues, with their study based in a Scottish county, remind us that it has never been easy for culturally and geographically marginalized gay men to get access to publicly visible gay communities (Davis et al., 2016). They suggest "the debate should be reframed in terms of what collective sexual life could become in the era of hook-up technologies and related capacities for connection with others" (Davis et al., 2016, p. 849). Moreover,

the "decline theory" cannot be applied universally, since the development of information and communication technology (ICT) is believed to have facilitated the flourishing of gay communities in some non-Western societies, such as in Asia (Berry et al., 2003).

Some studies claim that dating apps actually provide alternative access to the gay community. Framing dating apps as social networking sites (SNSs), Gudelunas (2012) demonstrates that gay-specific SNSs provide gay men with virtual spaces where they can connect to the larger gay community apart from existing physical spaces like gay bars. Given the relative homogeneity on gay SNSs, gay men are more likely to reveal their sexual identity and express their desires. But even so, they do not totally get away from dominant gender norms. Within the gay community on dating apps, the policing of masculinity still exists and reinforces a masculine elite, "an elite that is predominantly white, young, fit, and healthy" (Rodriguez et al., 2016).

In more detailed accounts of gay men's relations to each other, there has been an interest in gay men's app use for sex. Gudelunas (2012) argues that dating apps facilitate gay men's ability to seek casual sexual encounters; Tziallas (2015) attributes the success of gay dating apps partly to their functioning as amateur porn platforms; Licoppe and his colleagues (2015) delineate how users deliberately circumvent emotional involvement through strategic interaction. Although some studies reinforced the reputation of dating apps as "hook-up apps", others allow more nuances into the discussion of gay men's sexual and social relations. For example, Race (2015a) theorizes the dating app as "infrastructure of the sexual encounter", or shortly "sexual infrastructure". He argues that this new sexual infrastructure "is generating new modes of material participation in gay sexual culture, new forms of community and speculative practices" (Race, 2015a, p. 269). For instance, in contrast to walking into a public restroom and engaging in sex with strangers in silence (Humphreys, 1970), chat mechanisms on dating apps enable various forms of control, wherein picture exchange is an essential step in establishing trust (Albury & Byron, 2016), and make it possible for casual sex seekers to anonymously disclose themselves before sexual encounters (Race, 2015b). Storage and retrieval functions of dating apps promote "the capacity to maintain a loose web of fuck-buddies" (Race, 2015a), a relation referred to as "fuckbuddyhood" in popular press articles, because users

are able to stay in touch via dating apps. Sex without a romantic relational commitment does not have to be a single occurrence. New meanings may be given to sex between two men who are not lovers, and new forms of social arrangements may be coming into being. Race (2015a, p. 271) puts it in this way:

This is a historically distinctive way of arranging erotic and intimate life, which may be approached as a specific infrastructure of intimacy that has erotic, social and communal potentials. These devices and practices are participating in the construction of a specific sphere of sociability and amiable acquaintance among men in urban centers that prioritizes sex as a principle [*sic*] mechanism for connection and sociability.

Nevertheless, the sociability and cordial ambiance among gay men on the apps seem to be counterbalanced by one's reduced obligation to the other, which is instantiated by dating apps' blocking capacity (Davis et al., 2016). Moreover, as shown in Yeo and Fung's (2017) study based in Hong Kong, users who seek more durable relationships can be frustrated by the incongruence between the accelerated tempo of browsing and exchange on apps and the normative tempo prescribing formation of friendships and romantic relationships. Those "accelerated relationships" are perceived by some users to be ephemeral.

Questions to Be Answered

Notably, gay dating app studies have focused on the remediation of gay men's dating practices, and the reformation of social relations among gay men. The reconfiguration of dating apps as technological artefacts has received less attention. To compensate for that, researchers may consider the comparisons of artefacts in both horizontal and longitudinal dimensions. With the horizontal dimension, researchers may compare the technological features of dating apps with those of the mainstream SNSs or traditional dating sites, comprehending dating apps as a special "genre" of social media. Within this genre, researchers may find more nuances by comparing dating apps with one another, given that the design difference between two dating apps can inspire different interpretations and preferred motives of users (MacKee, 2016). Moreover,

when we see researchers elaborately delineate the design features of dating apps only to contextualize users' practices, we should bear in mind that it is a single static moment cut from the continuous evolution of dating devices. The missing piece to the puzzle is a historical and technical "genealogy" (Allen-Robertson, 2017) that accounts for the relations between dating apps and antecedent dating devices, or a "media archaeology" revealing how dating apps came into being and are developing (Parikka, 2012). How did dating app designers draw inspiration from prior media forms, such as SNSs and dating sites, as well as from people's existing practices? How are dating apps evolving along with users' practices and articulated expectations, and the subtle, gradual transformation of social relations? Questions about the reconfiguration of dating devices for gay men remain to be answered. Even for researchers who are more interested in dating practices and social relations, it is beneficial to consider the continuity of dating devices' lineage as well as the uniqueness that distinguishes dating apps from SNSs and dating sites.

To grasp the co-evolution between user practices and dating apps, "data cultures" (Albury et al., 2017) of mobile dating apps – how user data is generated, collected and processed in the development of dating apps, and how users experience data structures and processes – can be a good starting point. Moreover, how is this co-evolution locally subject to social arrangements on the institutional level, such as governmental internet regulations and gay men's legal position? Regarding this question, Chinese researchers have shed some light upon how the development of Chinese dating apps are shaped by political, financial, and entrepreneurial factors (Miao & Chan, 2020; Wang, 2020). Western apps that are globally popular among gay users, such as Grindr and Tinder, still need such scrutinization. Researchers may also examine how dating apps are reconfigured in a transnational context. An example can be taken from Blued, which has a Chinese version and an international version, with different design features for different target users (Miao & Chan, 2020).

On the other hand, studies on the reformation of gay communities and gay social relations can be more fruitful. With respect to dating apps' impact on gay communities, researchers should reject the monolithic "decline theory" and look into local paths for gay communities in a "dating app era". Regarding physical gay venues, such as gay bars, which have long been seen as an indicator of the

vitality of gay communities, researchers should explore more how the roles and meanings of these venues have transformed with the prevalence of dating apps (Rafalow & Adams, 2017). As for online gay communities, it is worth thinking about how gay men experience the division between dating apps and other online gay venues, and moreover, the division among user groups clustered around different dating apps. As previous studies show, many gay dating apps are targeted at specific subgroups within gay communities, such as Scruff for "bears" (Roth, 2014); Tinder-like designs are believed to spawn a better "quality" of users than Grindr-like design does (MacKee, 2016). Researchers should examine whether these apps have reinforced the subcultures marked by bodies within gay communities, and whether they forged a hierarchical perception of online gay communities.

With regard to the interpersonal relationships fostered by dating apps, "sex as a principle [*sic*] mechanism for connection and sociability" (Race, 2015a: 271) has extended our understanding of sexual relations. This challenges an understanding that has long been dominated by the sexual scripts of "non-strings-attached" sex (Olmstead et al., 2013). Researchers may examine how this sociability is experienced by gay men who use dating apps. Besides, it is also worth scrutinizing how the affordances of dating apps for social relations shape our existing interpersonal relationships in everyday, "offline" settings. As I have discussed, dating apps may bring tension to newer romantic relationships where partners have not yet discussed their relationship objectives or negotiated how they relate to strangers on dating apps (Albury & Byron, 2016; Brubaker et al., 2014). Thus, researchers should examine the new sets of norms and expectations formed around the use of dating apps for negotiating social relations online and offline.

Of course, it is impossible to answer these many questions with my own PhD research. Choices must be made. Looking back on how I took up this research project, I see that I have always been most interested in how dating apps shape social connections between gay men. Accordingly, I have chosen to focus on the *reformation* of gay men's intimate relationships in this study. Based on the literature gaps I have identified in the above sections, my research questions are: (a) how single gay men develop social relationships through dating apps, which are believed by many people to facilitate impersonal casual sex instead of lasting

social connections; (b) how dating app use can be negotiated by gay couples and become acceptable in their relationships; (c) how gay users experience and perceive the division within the community, stratifying the desirability of user groups clustered around different dating apps. Overall, I expect this study to enhance our understanding of how gay men's lives are shaped by media technologies, bring awareness to sexual minorities' conditions in China, and also provide a reflective account of what we have taken for granted when we think about love and sex.

Methods

For this study, I conducted 65 one-on-one interviews with 61 Chinese non-heterosexual men, including 58 self-identified gay men, one self-identified bisexual man, and two men who were still exploring their sexualities. Four participants were interviewed twice. All interviews were semi-structured and in-depth, conducted by online voice call via WeChat between October 2017 and November 2019. Since I was staying in the Netherlands, online interviews not only saved on traveling expenses that could not be covered by my very limited research fund (O'Connor et al., 2008), but also allowed for more reflective responses and were useful for asking private or sensitive questions (Madge & O'Connor, 2004).

To recruit participants, I posted advertisements on two Chinese social media platforms, WeChat and Douban. There were two waves of recruitments. The first wave took place in the second half of 2017. At the time, I aimed to recruit gay participants from Beijing, where I lived for seven years before I moved to the Netherlands. I chose the city I was most familiar with, because it would make it easier for me to understand how the socio-geographical features of the place of residence influence gay men's dating app use. There were 20 self-identified gay participants and one participant who was still exploring his sexuality. While 19 of the participants were living in Beijing at the time of interviewing, two had studied in Beijing for four years and left to study in other cities. Interviews addressed all the three research questions mentioned above. It is noteworthy that three participants were working in the internet industry and had more knowledge of app design and the marketing strategies of the dating

app companies than other participants. Among the three participants was Ankang, 25-year-old, a former product manager of the Chinese MSM-targeted app Blued. Given his "insider" knowledge, I will direct a lot of attention to his account when I elaborate on how marketing strategies of dating app companies shape the dating landscape in Chapter 5.

The second wave of recruitment took place in the latter half of 2018. This time, I mainly focused on the appropriation of dating apps in romantic relationships, while questions about the experience with different dating apps were also asked during the interviews. Participants needed to meet at least one of the two following criteria: (a) the participant was currently having a romantic relationship in which at least one party was using one or more dating apps; (b) the participant used to have a relationship in which at least one party had used any dating app. As there was no requirement for the place of residence, I got to talk with 38 self-identified gay men, as well as one self-identified bisexual man, from different cities. Nobody, however, was living in a rural area. At the time of interviewing, 19 participants were single, and 20 were non-single. Among the non-single participants, six 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 for getting extra facts from their partners. Many of them even told me some things that they had not told their partners. They probably would not have been comfortable with me interviewing their partners. Nevertheless, I made an exception for one couple: Dongchen and Quan. Dongchen was the one who volunteered to be a participant. He claimed that Quan and he were practicing an open relationship without openly admitting it to each other. To confirm that, I needed to interview Quan. Therefore, after explaining the potential risk to Dongchen and getting his approval, I conducted a separate interview with Quan.

To enrich my data, from October to November 2019 I conducted another round of interviews with four participants from the first wave of recruitment. Meanwhile, I interviewed one new participant, a gay friend of mine who had long wanted to participate in my research. At the time, I aimed to learn more about user experience on the apps less popular than the market dominator Blued.

These five participants were familiar with Aloha, Grindr, Tinder, or other apps. I chose them also because they were talkative and could provide rich reflective accounts. Therefore, for this study I conducted 65 interviews in total. The length of interviews varied between 28 and 110 minutes (mean=62). Overall, the first-wave interviews constitute the main basis of chapter two, which is focused on single gay men's relationship development on dating apps. Chapter 3 examines non-single gay men's dating app use and are thus mainly based on the second-wave interviews. Chapter 2 on the neoliberal context of gay relationships and Chapter 5 on the broader landscape of dating apps are based on all interviews.

As I said, four participants participated in two formal interviews; many provided me with extra information when I asked them follow-up questions on WeChat from time to time. Participants' ages were changing in this course. Nevertheless, in this thesis I only report the ages of the participants at the time when they first contacted me. I put their ages in brackets right after their names. For instance, I did two formal interviews with Shuai in 2017 and 2019, and I had been following up his statuses on WeChat. Shuai was 27 years old in 2017. Therefore, when I first mention him in the empirical chapter, it will be "Shuai (27)". To retrospect the basic information about the participants mentioned in the empirical chapters, you can turn to the appendix at the end of this thesis. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

Although I conducted the interviews in Mandarin, participants occasionally used some English words. The word *gay* appeared much more frequently than its Chinese counterparts: *tongzhi* (同志) and *tongxinglian* (同性恋). This is probably because the Chinese word *tongxinglian* carries connotations of medical abnormality (Rofel, 2007), and the more neutral word *tongzhi* is not that popular. Some other English words, such as "well-educated" and "low", are regularly used in the Chinese gay community. I will discuss their special connotations for Chinese gay men in the empirical chapters. Meanwhile, there were some English words used sporadically, which I will not discuss in detail. This is not surprising, considering that many participants studied abroad, traveled to other countries, or worked for transnational companies. No matter what, I will italicize the English words that appear in the quotes. On the other hand, the Chinese idioms and proverbs used by the participants are translated into English and italicized; in the brackets following them are their Chinese

written forms. Some Chinese folk concepts are translated into English and put in quotation marks, with the Chinese written forms following. The most important folk concepts that help us grasp the particularities of the Chinese context, such as *suzhi* (素质: quality), are italicized and written in Pinyin, the official romanization system for Chinese in mainland China; their Chinese written forms and English translation are provided.

Besides the interviews, I also use some supplementary data, such as informal conversations with my participants and my gay friends on WeChat and Douban, the notes I made during my participant observations on dating apps when I was in China for holidays, some discursive materials I collected on the internet, and even my own experiences as a Chinese gay men. You probably have noticed that I, as the narrator, frequently appear in my writing. With me being visible to you, this ethnographic study "acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). My role in this study is manifest in many ways. As I mentioned earlier, my own dating experiences led me to the questions about gay relationships mediated by dating apps. The common Chinese queer identity shared by me and my participants helped establish openness and trust in the interviews. In addition, living in the Netherlands gave me the chance to compare the gay lives here and in China. Informed by both the differences and similarities between the gay communities of these two countries, I associate the specialities of the Chinese case with socio-political factors, instead of making essentialist assumptions about the ethnocultural characteristics of Chinese people.

Since dating apps are location-based services, participants were aware that their experience was shaped by their geolocations. During the interviews, some referred to the Chinese city tier system that was established by media publications and had gained wide popularity as a point of reference, though never recognized by the Chinese government. This city stratification is based on the population size, income levels, business opportunities, consumer behavior, and so on ("Chinese City Tier System," 2019). Fifty-two participants were living in the so-called "tier-one" cities, as well as the "new tier-one" which may still be perceived as tier-two by some people, including Beijing (34), Shanghai (7), Guangzhou (3),

Chengdu (2), Shenzhen (1), Changsha (1), Tianjin (1), Hangzhou (2), Nanjing (1). Except for Changsha, these cities all have a metropolitan population greater than 10 million. Four participants were living in lower-tier cities. One participant was living in Hong Kong, which is not included in the city tier system. Only two participants were native to the city (Beijing) they currently lived in; others had left their hometowns, often some provincial cities, for study or job opportunities. All but a few participants either had occupations that would be perceived as middle-class occupations in the Chinese context[3] (e.g., PR practitioner, product manager, business consultant, doctor, lawyer, etc.) or were university students who came from middle-class families and were likely to become middle class members in the future (Rocca, 2017). This means that our conclusions cannot be simply applied to dating app users from other social classes, who are less likely to express their sexual orientations or self-identify as gay (Barrett & Pollack, 2005). Meanwhile, participants were relatively young, with ages ranging from 18 to 44 (mean = 25.8). My data shows that age also serves the division of, for instance, physical characteristics, aesthetic features in self-presentation, communicative patterns, and thus desirability. Therefore, elder middle-class gay men may not fit into the group my participants represent.

Participants reported an array of dating apps, including the local, the foreign, the MSM-targeted, and the mainstream (Figure 1). The most frequently mentioned apps were two gay-targeted apps developed by Chinese companies: Blued and Aloha. The most frequently mentioned foreign apps were Grindr, Jack'd, and Tinder. The Chinese dating apps Blued and Aloha have the functionality of live streaming, which is not geographically bound. A popular live streamer may

	Local	**Foreign**
MSM-targeted	Aloha, Blued, Fanpaizi (翻牌子), Zank	Grindr, Hornet, Jack'd, ROMEO
Mainstream	Tantan (探探)	Tinder, Coffee Meets Bagel

Figure 1. Dating apps reported by participants.

3 The Chinese scholar Lu Xueyi "constructed" the social stratification of Chinese society by the categories of occupation (as cited in Rocca, 2017, p. 37). According to this construction, the "middle strata", or middle class, consists of "professional and technical staff", "office workers", and "industry and trade individual entrepreneurs".

have tens of thousands of viewers from all over China (Wang, 2020). However, only four participants of this study were regular viewers of live streaming. As for the others, some said they had watched a few times and found it boring; one said he was too busy with work to watch live streaming. Since my participants were mostly middle-class residents of tier-one cities, I infer that live streaming viewers mainly live in lower-tier cities or belong to lower social classes. Given most participants' lack of interest in live streaming and my focus on one-on-one intimate relationships, live streaming is thus out of my scope and will not be discussed in this study.

Chapter Overview

Informed by Lievrouw's (2014) *mediation* framework, this study seeks to understand how dating apps mediate Chinese gay men's intimate relationships and participate in the latter's reformation. First, we need to understand what it means for Chinese gay men to have an intimate relationship. In Chapter 2, I discuss how the significance of intimate relationships is defined by both the material and discursive conditions created by China's neoliberalization process. The material and discursive conditions seem to work against each other in the shaping of the intimate relationships. On the one hand, the material needs and the following mental stress in the highly competitive Chinese society determine that a partnership with another person serves individuals' interests. With the partner's support, a gay man may find it easier to resist the risks and stress in socio-economic life. On the other hand, neoliberal campaigns such as the state-led "civilizing" project have created a discursive environment where autonomy and self-care have been set up as the norms. In line with that, neoliberal beliefs about the ideal relationships emphasize equality and financial independence. Since neoliberalism drives individuals to reinvent and improve themselves, an ideal relationship is also supposed to help one gain a sense of achievement. One who has not found an ideal partner is more likely to justify singlehood than to compromise the criteria for the partner. Overall, neoliberalism seems to be the undertone of participants' narratives about their dating practices, relationship maintenance, and their understanding of desires and desirability, which are examined in Chapter 3, 4, and 5.

Chapter 3 explores how urban gay singles in China develop social relationships on dating apps. According to my findings, they expect to connect with those they call *interesting people*, mainly well-educated middle-class subjects who embody neoliberal values such as self-achievement and self-improvement. Relationship development is often driven by casual conversations, which are not motivated by clear pragmatic purposes (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Casual conversations tend to unfold around common hobbies or experiences, serving as a source of sociability, or satisfaction in socializing itself (Simmel, 1949). In contrast to casual conversations, two forms of conversations are deemed highly instrumental and undesirable: one is the sex-oriented conversation aimed at immediate sexual encounters; the other is the interrogative conversation in which people ask private questions in a nonreciprocal and rigid way. Besides craving sociability, users "relationalize" casual sex by perceiving it as a form of social connection and endowing it with the potential to foster a relationship. This is also reflected in users' preference for sexual partners with whom they can hold a conversation. Users also exploit the affordances of different media platforms and capture the relationship potential by platform switching. They switch to the mainstream media platform WeChat for more synchronous communication and to collect more identity cues from each other. Platform switching also signals willingness for relationship development and mutual trust. Nevertheless, users keep going back to dating apps for new possibilities for social relationships.

In Chapter 4, I draw on domestication theory (Berker et al., 2006) and look at how non-single Chinese gay men use dating apps, how gay couples negotiate the rules of dating app use and the boundaries of their relationships, and what symbolic meanings are associated with dating apps. Findings show that non-single gay users' various motives and uses generally construct a dual role of dating apps: a pool of sexual/romantic alternatives and a channel to the gay community. Although the former constitutes a threat to monogamy, the latter leaves room for the negotiation between the couple for acceptable but restricted uses. This negotiation is in tandem with the negotiation of relational boundaries, as the domestication of dating apps can result in either the reinforcement of monogamy or the embrace of non-monogamy. Regarding the symbolic meanings of dating apps, Chinese gay men tend to dismiss dating apps as being no more remarkable than other social media platforms. This is achieved through a cognitive process where they learn to analyze the relationship experience of

themselves or others and debunk the arbitrary association between dating apps and infidelity. Monogamous or not, they put faith in user agency and do not perceive dating apps as a real threat to romantic relationships. In other words, it is the individual, not dating apps or the socio-technical environment, that they hold accountable. Their emphasis on autonomy and self-discipline align with the neoliberal beliefs about relationships and the self.

Chapter 5 examines the structural nature of urban Chinese gay men's mobile dating practices in a polymedia environment where one can access an array of mobile dating apps. Drawing on sexual field theory (Green, 2014a), I define *structures of desire* in the sexual field as the transpersonal valuations of desirability and the dominance of particular desires that coordinate actors' expectations and practices. My findings throw light upon the different structures of desire hosted by four dating apps: Aloha, Blued, Grindr, and Tinder. I argue that factors like design features of dating apps, marketing strategies of app companies, and internet regulations have shaped the structures of desire by unevenly distributing platform access to users across social classes and territorial divisions and (dis) enabling particular communicative practices in collective sexual life to different extents. Notably, urban middle-class gay men invoke the discourse of *suzhi* (素质：quality), which is at the core of China's neoliberal "civilizing" project, to articulate the stratification of desirability.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes this study with an overview of the key findings in the previous chapters, connecting them to the broader discussion on dating app use and the reformation of gay men's intimate relationships in neoliberalized China.

Chapter 2

Gay Relationships in a Neoliberalized China

The day I strongly felt the connection between my research topic and neoliberalism for the first time was on the 28th of November 2018. I was interviewing Huli (25), a management consultant who moved to Shanghai for work after graduation from Peking University, one of the most prestigious universities in China. During our interview, I found him to be funny, smart, and a little bit mean. I got this impression when he imitated his emotionally needy boyfriend and artificially talked in an effeminate and childish manner, and when he joked about my age by calling me "old brother" (老哥哥). Based on the fact that I was doing a PhD, he assumed I was in my 30s, while I was only one year older than him. But it was when I asked him whether he would be afraid of singlehood that he turned out to be a little cynical.

Me: Would you fear to be single?

Huli: Why should I fear? I can hook up when I'm single. Why should I fear? Maybe it's impossible [to hook up] after 30. But that's not for sure.

Me: Let me put it this way. I interviewed a 26-year-old guy, our peer. He already started to make preparations, such as financial investment, considering that he might be alone for the rest of his life.

Huli: I think this has nothing to do with being *gay*. […] My opinion is simple. It doesn't matter whether you are *gay* or not. It only matters whether you are strong or not. Who fucking *care* [*sic*] [about your sexuality] if you are strong enough? Nobody minds [Tim] Cook being gay. Nobody would point at Cook's nose and say "you fucking faggot". People from the lower levels may gossip about it. But when you are on a high level, people around you wouldn't do so. As for those who are beneath you, just leave them alone. You fucking… Fucking… I mean, someone who is beneath you wants to provoke you not only because you're *gay*. He may be jealous because you earn more money than he does. He may have all sorts of reasons. Why would you *care* about these people? Don't you get tired [by caring]?

Me: So you don't—

Huli: So the root cause is whether one is "freaking awesome" (*niubi*, 牛逼). It has nothing to do with you being *gay*. Of course, if you are not freaking awesome indeed, being *gay* may have more negative influences on you.

Me: So you think if you are strong enough yourself, for instance, if you have—

Huli: Yeah, I think so.

Me: A good income, you will take care of, in your later life—

Huli: Yeah!

Me: All kinds of difficulties.

Huli: Yeah!

While I was actually asking about the financial and elderly-care issues a single gay man might be concerned with, as well as the mental stress they may cause, Huli got carried away by talking about the discrimination against gay men, which counts as a "life difficulty" as well. Being "strong" was the answer he gave me, and he seemed to designate it as a global solution to all the possible difficulties facing gay men. Vague as this answer may seem, it mainly refers to climbing up the social ladder, getting to a high position, and taking care of oneself. What I saw in it were the tenets of self-achievement, self-dependence, and self-care that characterize a neoliberal self. With that in mind, I read my interview transcripts with fresh eyes, finding the neoliberal self to be a repeated theme.

Neoliberalism, as Harvey (2005, p. 2) argues, is "in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private rights, free markets, and free trade". Neoliberalism suggests the state should interfere less with the economy and guarantee the functioning of a free market. This can be achieved by, for instance, opening the country to foreign trade and capital flows, introducing

greater flexibility into labor markets, privatizing state-owned companies, industrializing the public sectors such as education and social security, and so on (Harvey, 2005). Although this allows the individual to act more freely in the market, it also shifts many caretaking responsibilities from the state to the individual. Accordingly, one's political-economic position is attributed to his or her own "inherent" characteristics, such as diligence/laziness and intelligence/obtuseness.

As a process of social change, neoliberalization does not only implicate political-economic practices. It comes along with the circulation of the neoliberal discourse among the public. Providing people with a conceptual tool to interpret, live in, and understand the world, this neoliberal discourse also *interpellates* us into a subject position that is the best fit for the material conditions anticipated and created by neoliberal political-economic practices. Characterized by self-management, self-optimization, and self-achievement, the neoliberal subject deems itself as a project or an enterprise that one should work on for his or her own good (B.-C. Han, 2017). In principle, "people who fail in the neoliberal achievement-society see themselves as responsible for their lot and feel shame instead of questioning society or the system" (Han, 2017, p. 6).

Despite the self-dependence and freedom it cheers for, neoliberalism objectively leads to a situation where individuals, if they do not belong to the privileged upper class, are more vulnerable in the ruthless capitalist market when they are stripped of the protective cover of the state. A neoliberal subject may feel ashamed to do so, but to withstand risks he or she has to develop some forms of solidarity with others. This need gives rise to various forms of social organizations, as Harvey (2005) argues, "from gangs and criminal cartels, narco-trafficking networks, mini-mafias and favela bosses, through community, grassroots and non-governmental organizations, to secular cults and religious sects proliferate". Apart from these social organizations, people may also seek support from smaller social units such as families or close relationships. For instance, Clara Han (2012) reveals in her ethnographic work that people from the poor urban neighborhood in Chile turn to kinships, friendships, or neighborliness to borrow food, to help pay off another's debt, to coexist in a precarious socio-economic life. Others studies have shown that support from personal networks constitutes an important supplementary resource for

low-income people (e.g., Edin & Lein, 1997; Lavee & Offer, 2012; Nelson, 2000). In an authoritarian country like China where the development of social organizations is highly controlled and constrained, interpersonal relationships and personal networks may assume a bigger role. They offer help to people who need immediate material support and serve as a reservoir for those who are safe for the time being. In this sense, people may perceive marriages and other forms of long-term partnerships to be materially supportive. As China has not legalized gay marriage, a stable romantic relationship may fill the void to a large extent for gay men.

Neoliberalization Experienced by Chinese Gay Men

The neoliberalization process in contemporary China started in 1978, when the Communist party launched the "reform and opening-up" project. Since then, this project has gradually transformed China's planned economic system into a more market-oriented one. While establishing a social system where capitalist enterprises can form and function freely, it has also facilitated "the evisceration of social protections, the imposition of user fees, the creation of a flexible labor market regime, and the privatization of assets formerly held in common" (Harvey, 2005, p. 150). Apart from rapid economic growth, this neoliberal reform has also generated many socio-economic problems: healthcare is expensive and even unaffordable to the lower social strata; the skyrocketing housing prices in the last two decades squeeze young workers' wallets; the highly competitive education system has seen the widening regional and urban-rural divide (Millar et al., 2016; Mok & Lo, 2009; Z. Zhang, 2019). The material conditions created by neoliberalization forces many Chinese to take up heavy work to guarantee an average life and resist socio-economic risks. A piece of misinformation had been circulating among journalists and their audiences for years and years, saying that there are 600,000 deaths from overwork per year in China (see Monet, 2014; Oster, 2014; Xi, 2016; J. Zhang & Zhang, 2013). The way for the circulation of this misinformation was paved by the reality of high work pressure, which had been well-known to and experienced by Chinese people.

Neoliberalization cannot be achieved without cultivating neoliberal subjectivity. Apart from economic reform, the Chinese government has also launched social campaigns that promote neoliberal values. One of the most prominent campaigns is the "civilizing" project that is aimed at producing a strong correlation between the "responsibilization" of the citizenry and the goal of an orderly and productive market society (Tomba, 2009). At the core of this campaign is the discourse of *suzhi* (素质). Often translated as "quality", *suzhi* mainly refers to "the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct" (Jacka, 2009, p. 524). A high-*suzhi* subject is an educated, well-mannered, autonomous, and responsible citizen who is pursuing self-improvement (Tomba, 2009). In this sense, the high-*suzhi* subject is pretty much a local embodiment of neoliberal subjectivity.

Just like their heterosexual compatriots, Chinese gay men not only adapt to the material condition shaped by the neoliberal economic policies and practices, but also react to the interpellation of the official discourses, such as the *suzhi* discourse, into the neoliberal subjects. A palpable result is the circulation of the notion of "*suzhi*" within the Chinese queer community. For instance, researchers have noticed that urban middle-class gay men use the *suzhi* discourse to denounce "money boys" (male prostitutes) with rural backgrounds and exclude them from the queer community (Ho, 2010; Rofel, 2007; Wei, 2012). It should be noticed that these studies were completed before dating apps emerged. As time has passed, there are both continuities and discontinuities in how urban gay men use *suzhi* to stratify the desirability of a queer subject, as I will show in Chapter 5. No matter what, it is safe to conclude that the neoliberal "civilizing" project has deeply influenced the vocabulary used by Chinese gay men to articulate their desires, their reasoning when they negotiate the way they connect to each other, and how they position themselves in the highly competitive Chinese society.

One may doubt how efficient the official discourses can be and argue that Chinese gay men are not totally immersed in the discursive environment sanctioned by the Chinese state, as they live in a globalized world today. Indeed, Chinese gay men have long been exposed to the Western liberalist discourse of LGBTQ equality. Even in the beginning in 1990s, the emergence of gay identities and practices in China was tied to transnational networks of lesbians

and gay men that helped Chinese carry out HIV prevention work among sexual minorities (Rofel, 2007). With the popularization of the internet and digital communicative devices, Chinese gay men have gained more access to information about their counterparts in foreign countries online. Physical transnational experiences have also become common, as many participants of this research have studied or travelled abroad.

However, many Chinese gay men do not see Western sexual politics as a template that can be simply applied to the Chinese context (Ho, 2010; Rofel, 2007; Wei, 2012). Nor is a large-scale bottom-up LGBTQ movement possible in authoritarian China, although homosexuality was decriminalized there in 1997 (Leung, 2017; Wei, 2012). The lack of interest in pushing for a Western-style sexual politics can be seen in my participants' accounts. Except for three men who were working for LGBTQ NGOs themselves, my participants hardly participated in the activities or events organized by NGOs. Most of the time, they were just "fighting" on their own by working hard and gaining more socio-economic resources to guarantee a less vulnerable position for themselves.

In a nutshell, Chinese gay men are positioned in an unprotected material situation. Aware of that, they know a close relationship may help them weather unpredictable storms in their socio-economic lives. However, as they have been shaped to be neoliberal subjects, they feel reluctant to rely on others and lose their independence. Meanwhile, those whom they find attractive tend to be neoliberal subjects as they are or aspire to be.

Material Implication of a Relationship

In our time in China, marriages or partnerships for solely economic reasons are no longer attractive for most people. Materialistic reasoning is significantly counterbalanced, though not replaced, by the pursuit of romance and authentic feeling (Farrer, 2010; Rocca, 2017). As I will show in Chapter 3, the sense of connection with another person was the main driver for relationship development in participants' online dating experiences. Emotional satisfaction is what metropolitan gay men prioritize when considering the good things a relationship could offer. The loneliness of living on one's own in a society that

consists of atomized individuals compels them into romance seeking. One may not find a boyfriend through dating apps right away, but the gay acquaintances he makes in this process can still offer some emotional support. For instance, Ankang (25), working at an internet company in Beijing, became friends with some gay men he first met on dating apps and remained both online and offline contact with them. He said:

> It's not that we are meeting frequently. What they mean to you in this city is like… Well, most people are living in a heterosexual-predominated environment. If you need someone to talk to, if you feel lonely, or if something happens to you, you may not find your heterosexual friends available. Because at our age, most of them [are not available]. I had a good female friend who used to live near around. We used to go to restaurants together very often. But after she got engaged and bought a house, she didn't have much—because every time I dined out with her, her husband kept calling her. At that moment, you know your heterosexual friends are not focusing on this [the friendship] anymore. They are gradually getting on track in their own lives. Then only your *tongzhi* (同志: gay) friends are similar to you and not on track yet. So you would ask them out for a drink or take a walk with them.

In such a situation, having a partner means having someone who can shield off the loneliness for you. However, craving for emotional satisfaction does not mean that one does not consider at all the pragmatic benefits that come along with a stable partnership. This can be seen in how my participants talked about the material disadvantages of being single. Prominently, the fear of *getting old and dying alone* (孤独终老) reported by many participants implicates the pragmatic considerations such as healthcare issue. Rui (30), a freelance musician, said:

> I'm 30 years old this year. My mother is alone, and she is getting older and older. When I look at her, I always think about her elderly care and then relate myself to that. Because I'm 30 and I have health issues occasionally. If I will always be alone, then nobody will take care of me. That's quite sad. […] And we [gay men] won't have children, so there is nothing I can look forward to.

Similarly, Boshi (31), a PhD student, regarded a stable relationship as a mean "to enhance one's risk-resistance capacity". He said: "For instance, when you get hit by a car, your fuckbuddies would take care of you? When you lie in the bed and can't move, or when you need to be helped up, you think your fuckbuddies would care?"

Accordingly, the lower risk-resistance capacity as the consequence of singlehood should be compensated by other means. Like many interviewees, Gaoxing (26), working at an HR department, had started to prepare himself for the long-term loneliness mentally and materially. Firm about being gay, Gaoxing said he decided not to marry a woman. In China, some gay men fake as straight and get married to women, bowing to socio-cultural pressure; some choose to do a marriage of convenience with lesbians. Refusing both paths, Gaoxing reckoned that he would probably "get old and die in loneliness" since he perceived the chance of the third path, finding a boyfriend, to be very small. He said: "No marriage [with a woman] means no partner. It also means that the chance to have your own children is small. Don't mention surrogacy to me. It's a different matter. So, your [own] elderly care will have problems."

Although many interviewees including Gaoxing complained about how hard it was to find a boyfriend and expressed their concerns for the mental and material disadvantage of being single, none of them seemed willing to lower their standards for an ideal partner to increase their chance. Instead, they were making preparations, individually, to manage potential risks in their future lives. For them, working hard and earning money is the most legitimate source of security in either a mental or material sense. Wenjie (25), a PR practitioner based in Guangzhou, used to fear being single when he was a university student. With his financial condition improving after finding a job, he felt more secure. He said:

> I used to fear, because my financial condition… I mean, I wasn't "excellent" (优秀) enough. I was just a student, and I liked shopping. I couldn't go to many good, fancy places. Now my income can support my… I mean, in the domestic standard, I'm not rich and I don't earn that much money. But I can afford the first-class ticket of the domestic airline and the room in a five-star hotel. So when I can satisfy my own living needs, I have nothing

> to fear. […] When you're excellent enough, you have nothing to fear. You need to make yourself stronger. You should just be yourself, work, and earn money when the right person hasn't showed up.

What is interesting about his words is not just that excellence basically meant good financial condition to him, but also the sense of security he derived from consumption behaviors to which he attached significant meaning. These consumption behaviors reassured him that he could handle the material risk of living in the neoliberal Chinese economy as a single person. Most of all, work seems to have the magic power to soothe anxiety stemming from both material and psychological concerns, partly providing the support one would expect from a partnership. Indeed, I found the dialectic between work and relationship to be a prominent theme in my research. In the next section, I will present how my participants thought about the relation between work and relationships.

Dialectic Between Work and Relationship

At the time of writing this thesis, I was also looking for a job in academia. I talked about my lack of optimism with a British gay friend based in London, who earned his PhD at the University of Oxford and was familiar enough with academia. He said: "Unfortunately, for academia, you need to make a lot of applications before getting an interview. It's like Grindr, only more difficult!" Not long after that, I complained about how hard it is to find a boyfriend in the Netherlands to a Chinese female friend living in Canada. She suggested that I use dating apps—she did not know I was researching dating apps—and consoled me by stating that it also took her a long time to find a partner. She said: "It felt similar to job hunting."

The analogies between work and love made by my friends are not just a coincidence. This analogical reasoning is pervasive in our days and assumes an important role when people make important decisions about their lives. Work and relationships make up a large part of our lives and significantly influence each other. Unsurprisingly, the dialectic between a desirable job and an ideal relationship is present when we make sense of our situations. In some instances, we have to choose one of them and give up the other. Sometimes we attain both,

but need to carefully distribute our time and efforts to strike a balance between them. On other occasions, we have obtained one of them, while craving for the other. If we do not get the other, we may persuade ourselves that it is already much better than having neither, or that we would not have time and energy for the missing part anyway.

A good job opportunity can be at odds with a stable relationship, especially in a neoliberalized society with the high mobility required by a free labor market. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) maintain that the contradiction lies between the demands of the labor market and the demands of relationships of whatever kind, such as family, marriage, or friendship. As they argue:

> The ideal image conveyed by the labor market is that of a completely mobile individual regarding him/herself as a functioning flexible work unit, competitive and ambitious, prepared to disregard the social commitments linked to his/her existence and identity. This perfect employee fits in with the job requirements, prepared to move on whenever necessary (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 6).

The free labor market has created the need for individual mobility even on a global scale. Since it is not always convenient for two work-oriented subjects to find ideal jobs in close proximity of each other at the same time, one member of the couple may need to compromise. If not, a long-distance relationship can be a temporary way out of this dilemma. Although many participants described geographic distance as an insurmountable barrier that led or would lead them to breakup, some were engaged in long-distance relationships. Huli first met his boyfriend at Peking University. It is a job opportunity that took Huli to Shanghai, while his boyfriend stayed in Beijing. With the time it takes to travel by airplane from Beijing to Shanghai, one can fly from Amsterdam to Barcelona. Dongchen (28), an urban planning consultant, and Quan (28), a bank clerk, were a long-distance couple. They had never lived in the same city. They first met each other online in 2012 when they were still university students based in different provinces. After graduation, Dongchen found a job in Shenzhen, and Quan in Beijing. The straight-line distance between these two cities is 200 kilometers farther than that between Berlin and Istanbul. The long distance seems to be a strong complicating factor to monogamy. There seems to be a correlation

between distance and extradyadic sex in the stories of Huli, Dongchen, and Quan. Huli was using dating apps to hook up without his partner's knowledge. Dongchen and Quan were practicing an "open relationship", as they respectively had sex with other people on a regular basis.

Perhaps the story of Boshi can shed light upon the role played by the distance in one's reasoning. Boshi met his ex-boyfriend on Jack'd when he was working in the city of Xiangtan, Hunan province. His ex-boyfriend was living in Changsha, which neighbors Xiangtan. They often saw each other on the weekend. After being together for four years, Boshi moved to Shanghai to do a PhD. The physical distance between them greatly increased, and even the high-speed train G86, with an average speed of 269 km/h, would need 4.5 hours to bring his lover to him. With the frequency of meeting reducing to once every few months, the mental distance between them grew. Meanwhile, Boshi found that there were many more new faces on Blued in Shanghai than in the provincial city where he used to live. Through Blued, Boshi secretly found someone he deemed as a "regular fuckbuddy" (固炮), whom he gradually developed a feeling for. Although he never intended to end his relationship, his boyfriend sensed something wrong between them and thus broke up with him. It should be noted that the long distance was not the sole factor that prompted Boshi to seek extradyadic sex, nor was the large user base of Blued in Shanghai that offered him abundant opportunities. The decreased sexual attraction of his partner, which drove him to seek novelty through extradyadic sex, had existed before his moving. He had started to feel bored of "always the same person, always the same moves, always the same positions". Nevertheless, the distance held significance for him when he reflected on his experience. He said:

> I think the distance has a strong impact on one's mental state. I mean, the physical distance. Back then, although I was not in the same city as him [the boyfriend], I still feel close, as our cities were neighboring. This [short] physical distance made you feel mentally close. And you always had the feeling that it would be ridiculous to cheat on him when you were close to him. That's not good. But once you arrived in Shanghai, you felt *the mountain is high, the emperor far away* (山高皇帝远). Who would know what you are doing here!

Overall, the high mobility required by the free labor market is not good for the maintenance of a stable, monogamous relationship. Accordingly, it is common for young people to say they would find a good job and settle down first before they consider a stable relationship. Especially for those in their 20s or early 30s, whose careers are just taking off, perhaps more considerations would be given to jobs than to relationships.

Against this backdrop, the story of Xiaohu (23) stands out, as he once chose love over the opportunity of better education, which would be seen as an irrational decision by many of us. Originally from a remote mountainous region in Hunan province, Xiaohu was working in Hangzhou as channel manager for a large parcel delivery company. Since the first year of high school, he fell for a straight schoolmate who understood their relationship as mere brotherhood. His romantic feeling was never reciprocated. At the time of graduation, Xiaohu abandoned the opportunity to study at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Following his friend, he went to a vocational-technical school and spent another three years together with this man. Gradually, Xiaohu got disillusioned and realized that his obsession would lead to nowhere. Once the feeling died down, neoliberal rationality seized him. Although he regretted his choice about education, he was proud that his career was going well and that he got promoted faster than others. For now, the main goal of his life was to get a higher salary. He was supporting his parents by regularly sending money to them, and he wanted to maintain a quality life with organic food and products of particular brands. "I want to live a different life, and I want to have better tastes than those of the others." He said. Surely a hard worker, he spent his weekends working, studying, and "improving" himself. Work had become the main source of the meaning of his life:

> My parents are farmers, and I don't have a good background. I love my families, but I can only march forward and get out of the place surrounded by mountains. I must get out and fight for myself. In fact, my life is a typical striving history in China. You know? A powerless person strives for a higher position. You know? Cause people always say: you are only 23 years old, you are so young, and you are already a senior manager!

Xiaohu was not the only one who derived confidence from work. For Yangbin (40), working in international trades, his career achievements afforded him the opportunity to explore his sexuality with self-confidence. When he was younger, he used to be shy and self-unconfident. Appalled by his attraction to men, he denied it and married a woman. After a long journey of inner exploration, he divorced her and gradually accepted his sexuality. He said: "It's from my first job that I gradually found some self-confidence. I gradually accepted myself, because [I] became valuable to society. I feel it is in work, in my career, that I found myself." When I asked him if he gained a sense of security for his life from his career, he agreed and said:

> There is an old saying: *When the granaries are full, people follow appropriate rules of conduct* (仓廪实而知礼节). That is to say, there is a stage when you need to make a living first. That's what people call financial independence. This independence is of great support for faith in oneself. Then you will have more autonomy to lay your cards on the table. It is only at this time you will have the security of both the material and the spiritual, as well as the craving for affection.

This seems to fit into the pattern described by Rocca (2017): Once the Chinese middle incomers have satisfied material needs, they would embark on some sort of spiritual quest[4]. By divorcing his wife and accepting his sexuality, Yangbin was pursuing authenticity, which is valued by the Chinese middle class (Rocca, 2017).

Nevertheless, for younger gay men who work in the highly competitive environment of the first-tier cities, work may take too much time and put too much stress on them, so that a relationship, either a romantic one or a friendship, becomes secondary by being less urgent than work. Chuan (24), working in the automobile industry, felt the change in his social life. When he was a university student and had lots of free time, he made many gay friends through dating apps whom he often met offline. After graduation, he felt it became difficult to

4 For Xiaohu, the future spiritual quest would be reigniting his passion for painting arts, as well as travelling. "If I get promoted into executive and have more days for annual leave, I can fly to Europe. I want to see the outside world. I've always been working, and I have little time for myself. […] [But] I can't only work for work itself this whole life."

turn the online contact with someone into the offline one. He said: "Because people use too much time to *deal with* [their work]. Then you can hardly find time to *gather up*."

As work has limited social life in general, some interviewees even attributed the lack of engagement in offline LGBTQ movements to the commitment to work. Shuai (27), a management consultant, used to participate in offline activities organized by LGBTQ NGOs when he was a student. Now he felt he no longer had a passion for these activities: "I'm more focused on my work now." Yuyang (33), working for a transnational company, thought that Chinese gay men are too busy to take part in social movements[5]:

> To survive in society, many Chinese has spent too much mental and physical effort in their work and wages. There is no energy left for such things [social movements]. The pressure of reality, life, and material is big enough, which has cost 80 percent of the energy.

As I argued before, concerns about the material can be a factor that drives people to seek partners. Accordingly, once a person becomes self-sufficient with a good income and gains a sense of security, the need for a partner seems to weaken. Yuyang had been through this process. According to him, his "obsession" (执念) with the idea of finding a partner disappeared. He described his mental state as "formless" and compared it to those of the people who live in the more affluent societies: "I have many Japanese friends, and I found their mental state to be free-floating. […] Because they don't have many material pressures. They are mentally free. […] And you surely know what the European kids are like. They are too free, too formless."

When Yuyang mentioned Europe, I found it hard to resist his argument. Living in the Netherlands, I do feel that Dutch singles are more carefree and less scared of singlehood than Chinese singles. Before I interviewed Yuyang, I once had

5 The lack of time and energy has also limited Chinese people's participation in other types of movements, such as the movement for the defense of homeowners' rights. Rocca (2017, p. 185) says: "One of the leaders' main tasks is to mobilize a significant proportion of homeowners. But the task has proven difficult because most people work long hours and have no time or energy for extra activities."

the thought that I would better live in a welfare state like the Netherlands if I was going to be single in the rest of my life. By doing so, even if I may still suffer the mental stress of singlehood, at least I will suffer less from work. Take annual leave for example. In China, the duration of annual leave depends on the employee's seniority. Young Chinese employees in their 20s or early 30s often have accumulatively worked for less than 10 years, which means that they are entitled to only five days of annual leave. Meanwhile, they have 11 paid public holidays ("List of Minimum Annual Leave by Country," 2020). In the Netherlands, every full-time employee is legally entitled to at least 20 days of paid annual leave (Wedia, n.d.-b). Official holidays are 10 or 11 days, depending on the year (Wedia, n.d.-a). Therefore, most of my non-student participants had about 15 fewer holidays than their Dutch counterparts did. Apart from the fact that the Chinese have fewer holidays, it is common for people in the metropolises to work overtime. The catchphrase "996", which means that one needs to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, epitomizes the work pressure facing many Chinese (Lin & Zhong, 2019).

Ideal Partner and Ideal Self

The material and discursive conditions created by China's neoliberalization influence what gay men perceived to be an ideal partner and an ideal self. Physical attraction matters in partner seeking, but it is far from the sole decisive factor. The ideal partner, just like the ideal self, should be a well-educated and independent subject that is likely to make or have already made some achievements in his life. Moreover, an ideal partner should bring the best out of oneself, making the latter feel he is striding forward in the never-ending process of self-improvement, or as many young Chinese would say, *becoming a better self* (成为更好的自己).

Education is an important asset in neoliberalized China and has gained significant symbolic meaning. For the nationwide "civilizing" project, education helps cultivate the high-*suzhi* citizen that is autonomous and has a sense of responsibility. For individuals, to receive a good education is a vital step toward getting a good job and ranking into at least the middle class (Rocca, 2017). Being well-educated is so valued that it has become a clearly articulated criterion

for the ideal partner held by many Chinese, including gay men. They are also aware that being well-educated can be their own "selling point" if they are. This is reflected in the lyrics of a song about Chinese gay men's dating app use, which has circulated on the internet. It says: "To the left or right, [I] keep swiping through the pictures. [I] randomly click into the profile of a stranger. There is too much English in his profile: Doing a *PhD*, *well-educated*" (*Chu Chu Ling*, 2020). Interestingly, it is the English word "well-educated", rather than its Chinese counterpart, that is often used in the context of gay online dating. For instance, Chong (25), a postgraduate student, compared the gay men he observed on dating apps in two cities. "People in Shenzhen are mixed. Beijing is much better, as [the users] are all *well-educated*." When I discussed the prevalence of this English word in gay men's dating profiles with my interviewees and gay friends, some interpreted it as a sign of showing-off. Liu (28), a PR practitioner, mocked this phenomenon. "People with high education levels must use *a little English*. Otherwise it would seem too *local*, not *premium* enough." However, the interpretation provided by one of my followers on Douban seemed more convincing to me:

> As the traditional Chinese culture advocates modesty, in daily life one doesn't always mention that his/her education level is high. Even if it's true, one will not emphasize that. But on dating apps, one needs to show his/her advantage and thus emphasize it. The sense of shame caused by writing "*well-educated*" is much weaker than by writing "high education level" [in Chinese], since people are less sensitive to foreign languages. For instance, a native Chinese speaker would feel uncomfortable or even ashamed when talking about sex organs in Chinese. But this sense of shame will disappear when using the English words *penis* and *vagina*.

The reduced activation of social and moral norms in the use of foreign languages (Geipel et al., 2015; Hayakawa et al., 2017) paves the way, on the mental level, for the popularity of the English word "well-educated" in Chinese gay men's self-presentation in online dating. Although the fact about who first introduced this word into the Chinese context in what situation may remain a historical mystery, it is certain that metropolitan Chinese gay men are exposed to a transnational gay culture from which they may draw vocabularies and appropriate them for their own cause. The ability to master the English language is a prerequisite for

that. It is also the result and the symbol of the good education that makes a gay subject desirable to another, but only when the display of it is not seen as a show-off.

Apart from education, income also constitutes an important criterion for an ideal partner. Interestingly, relative equality was the undertone when participants talked about income, as they expected their ideal partners not to be much poorer than themselves. Liu said: "Because I don't earn much, I hope he can earn a little more than I do. Meanwhile, my salary should be increasing steadily. I mean, his current base should be higher than mine, but my increment speed should be faster than his." Meanwhile, Liu did not expect his ideal partner to be much richer than himself, since that means an unequal relationship where the less privileged party may lose autonomy. According to Gaoxing, both parties should have certain material bases that can sustain their respective life. If one party has a much lower material base, the life quality of the other party will deteriorate once they are together. "Everyone wants to find someone with a better material condition, a generous person who can give some material help to the other party. If not, at least he should not be much worse than yourself." While Gaoxing referred to life quality, Wenjie clearly associated income with consumption behaviors:

> For instance, I earn ten or twenty thousand yuan per month, which is not a large amount for many people, right? If he [the partner] only earns five thousand per month, he can't afford it if we stay at a five-star hotel which costs one thousand per night. […] If I have a relationship with you, are you really going to take me to the 7 Day Inn [a relatively cheap chain hotel]? I don't want to go… I can't go to that kind of place. Like I said to my friend, I would never go there. I'm allergic to it. Even if I go in, I can't breathe. The air there is not the same as that of the world where I breathe.

Besides the material satisfaction, consumption behaviors carry affective connotations. For Wenjie, one party's paying bills for the other is a sign of caring.

> Instead of his financial support for you, what you need is the feeling. What you enjoy is the feeling of being taken care of, and what he enjoys

> is the feeling of being needed. […] For instance, when we watch go to the cinema together, […] what I enjoy is that he says: "Baby, just sit here, I'm going to wait in the line." I mean, the feeling you have when he bought the drinks [and tickets] for you.

On some occasions, one party's spending lots of money for the other is interpreted as a sign of not being materialistic, which is key to the relationship based on authentic feelings. Huli emphasized that his boyfriend, who was still a university student, was likely to have a high-income job in the future and would earn more than him. But meanwhile, he said:

> It may sound paradoxical, but I don't care much about the economic aspect. Our relationship is very sweet. An important reason is that we both invest a lot in it, and we don't care much about money. He only has three and half thousand yuan [from the parents] to cover his monthly living cost. But when it was my birthday, he bought about seven gifts for me and spent about six or seven thousand. I was shocked when I got to know that. I said: "Are you insane?"

Overall, consumption behaviors in a relationship should not be merely out of material need. Shaped by the notion of a pure relationship and neoliberal reasoning, the norm of financial independence, however, does not eradicate the material transaction between a couple, given the affective meaning attached to it.

Another theme emerging from my interview was that one should get some help from his partner to become a better self, or to "grow" (成长). Inspiration in career is much valued, as career has become an important source in the construction of the self. In Liu's point of view, the ideal partner should be a few years older and more experienced than him, so that he can get some advice for career development. Unlike Liu, Wenjie was not expecting specific advice. For him, having a boyfriend who earns more money than he does would make him work harder and thus become more "excellent" (优秀). "If he takes up more [financial responsibilities], you will give yourself more pressure and think: Should I be more hardworking?"

For some participants, the sense of "growing" is more general, as career progress only contributes to part of it. Jiangshan (30), working for an LGBTQ NGO, talked about why he broke up with his ex-boyfriend.

> Jiangshan: At that time, there was no growth. […] I wanted to get out of the comfort zone and head forward. And there were disagreements [between us]. So [we] broke up.
>
> Me: I think it's interesting that people always say they hope to grow together. What counts as growing together? Getting out of the comfort zone?
>
> Jiangshan: I think it means two guys' being together needs to be better than being alone yourself.
>
> Me: In which aspect?
>
> Jiangshan: I think it's in a comprehensive way, including work, economy, and your sense of happiness and feelings.
>
> Me: So, in every aspect?
>
> Jiangshan: Yes! A sense of happiness, and a sense of achievement. The feeling that your life is getting better.
>
> Me: So, it may mean that your personalities are getting better, and your relationship is becoming smoother—
>
> Jiangshan: Yes!
>
> Me: You have learned more things, and you feel more spiritually satisfied. Even promotion and earning more money count as growth, right?
>
> Jiangshan: Yes!

Similarly, Fangyuan (31), a creative branding practitioner, maintained that a good relationship makes people become "better". "[Through a relationship] one realizes his/her own problems. You [learn] how to communicate with the other party, to establish an intimate relationship, to maintain it, and to deepen and enlarge it." Accordingly, a partner that does not grow or become better is undesirable. Fangyuan expressed his disappointment with his ex-boyfriend. "I could no longer tolerate a man who hadn't made any progress in two or three years. He was so young. His chance and efficiency of growth should be higher, you know?"

There were positive cases where participants felt that they and their lives were becoming better. Jiangshan was happy about his current relationship, in which he felt he had become more mature and more grown than before. Jiawei (29), a security consultant, felt his current relationship was the best one he had. He was satisfied in two aspects:

> First, I'm satisfied with the living standard. My salary has increased. [Laughing] I'm not saying that my partner pays me, but the salary bump has made the living standard better, which is an important basis [for the relationship]. Second, in terms of affection, my capability of relationship maintenance has enhanced.

In a word, growth has become an important measurement for the quality of a relationship[6]. A stagnant relationship is a bad relationship. For people like Fangyuan, "a [bad] relationship is worse than being single". Trying to see the bright side of the singlehood, they realize they have more time to invest in themselves. With the time, they may work harder, go to the gym, read more books, watch more movies, learn a new foreign language, develop a new hobby, gain a new skill, travel to more places, or do any other things that contribute to

6 One may expect growth in friendships as well. This can be seen in Xiaohu's account. Xiaohu and I had a common gay friend who used to be my classmate at Renmin University of China. They met in a gay chat group on WeChat. In the beginning, this friend sent many unsolicited nude pictures to Xiaohu, which annoyed the latter. "Don't disgust me, OK?" This was how Xiaohu responded. Gradually, Xiaohu found that this friend was well-educated and knowledgeable. "I think he's very talented and can be a friend," Xiaohu said. "He can make me grow. Maybe because I'm young, my knowledge of things is limited. Through him I can broaden my scope of knowledge."

their sense of self-achievement. Seen from this side, singlehood is not something to fear. People believe that the needs that were once supposed to be satisfied by the presence of another person can be satisfied through other means, such as technologies. Taotao (23), a journalist, had been single most of the time. He accepted his situation, saying that a partner is not necessary for one's life:

> It's actually quite easy to satisfy your needs, since the internet is so developed. […] For example, food and sex. With a dating app and a takeout app, […] you can do it through the internet. You don't need another person to do these things together with you. Unless you need to do surgery and someone needs to sign the paper for you, you can take care of many things yourself. To a large degree, it's more comfortable and smoother to solve the problems yourself than to do it with another person.

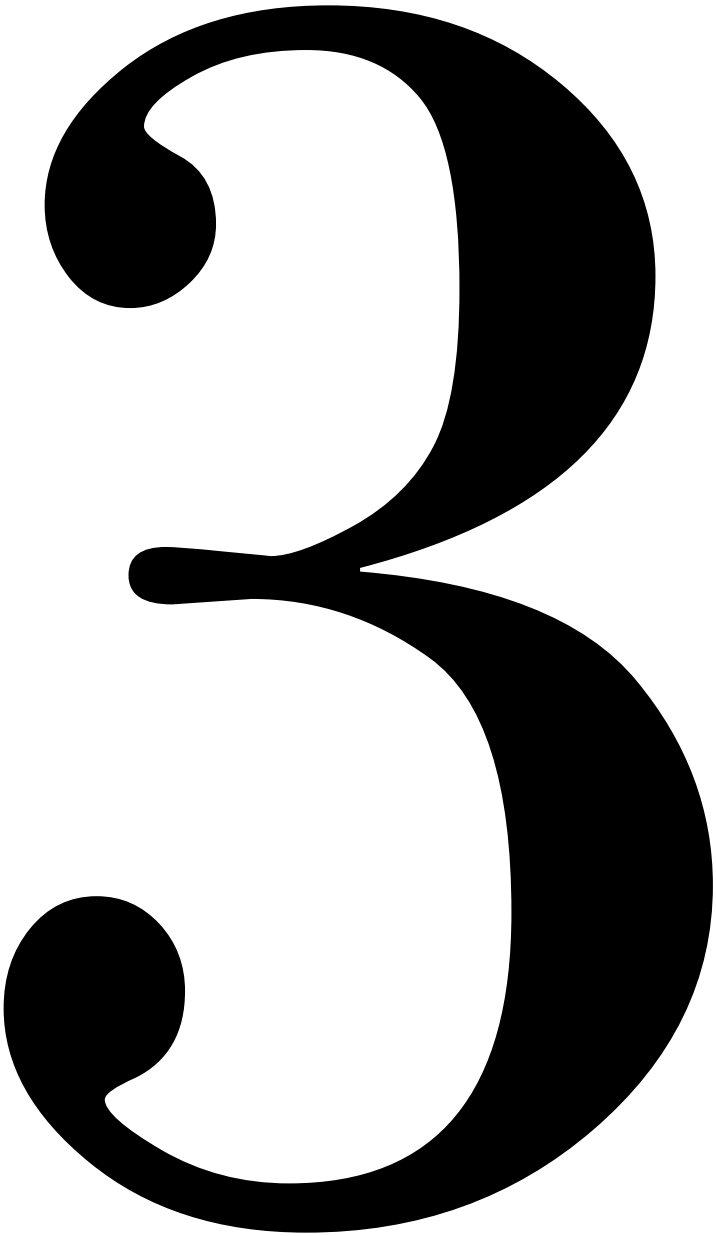
Harvey (2005) argues that the neoliberal theory of technological change holds the fetish belief that there is a technological fix for each and every problem. While Harvey seems to be talking about the problems in the political-economic arena, Taotao's words show that the neoliberal faith in technologies has also colonized the private realm.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored what a stable, long-term partnership means to a gay man in neoliberalized China. The significance of having such a relationship is determined by both the material and discursive conditions created by the neoliberalization process, which however seem to work against each other. On the one hand, individuals find themselves in a competitive society where they have to work hard to maintain a decent living and need to bear lots of risks in their socio-economic lives. The material needs, as well as the following mental stress, determine that a partnership with another person serves their interests. Meanwhile, the heavy workload and the geographic mobility generated by China's large free labor market result in a lack of time and a physical absence that hamper relationship development and maintenance. Stress and the sense of uncertainty respectively spawned by these two factors, however, may boost one's craving for an emotional anchor. On the other hand, neoliberal campaigns such

as the state-led "civilizing" project have created a discursive environment where autonomy and self-care have been set up as the norms. Specifically, Chinese gay men have extensively invoked the *suzhi* discourse when they articulate their criteria for desirable dating partners, which will be further discussed in Chapter 3 and 5. Converging with the notions of romance and authenticity, neoliberal beliefs about the ideal relationships emphasize equality and financial independence. Despite its utility, material exchange between a couple is acceptable when it is a gesture of love. The ideal relationship is also supposed to help one gain a sense of achievement in any aspect. One who has not found an ideal partner is more likely to justify singlehood than compromising the criteria for the partner.

The next three chapters will provide more insight about how neoliberal values are manifest in Chinese gay men's intimate relationships mediated by dating apps. Focusing on relationship development on dating apps, Chapter 3 shows that the "interesting people" urban gay men expect to find are basically well-educated middle-class subjects who embody the neoliberal ideal of high *suzhi*. When they are in a relationship and need to negotiate the boundaries of their partners' dating app use, they apply the neoliberal principles of autonomy and self-governance in judging whether the relationship is working or not, as revealed in Chapter 4. Zooming out to the broader landscape of dating apps, Chapter 5 offers some insight into the clustering of "high-*suzhi*" gay users around certain apps instead of others, which is shaped by technological features of dating apps, marketing strategies of app companies, and China's internet regulations.



Chapter 3

Relationship Development on Dating Apps

In recent years, dating apps have triggered social debates about love and sex. Notwithstanding the various and often entangled motives users have (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Ward, 2017), dating apps are constantly referred to as "hook-up apps" by researchers, especially in gay dating app studies (e.g., Albury & Byron, 2016; Davis et al., 2016; MacKee, 2016; Race, 2015a). Affordances of dating apps seem to be manifest in the facilitation of casual sex (Licoppe et al., 2015; MacKee, 2016) rather than "serious" relationships (Chan, 2018; Yeo & Fung, 2018). Given the mixed motivations reported by users, combined with a tendency of researchers and the media to promote a casual sex script, dating app studies could benefit from a broader perspective on how and why people use dating apps. In this research, I intend to pay more attention to social relationships, defined as "connections that exist between people who have recurring interactions that are perceived by the participants to have personal meaning" (August & Rook, 2013, p. 1838), and I ask the following question: How do users initiate and develop social relationships on dating apps?[7]

In China, dating apps have gained millions of gay users. Although China's "Great Firewall", among other internet regulation measures, has limited users' access to foreign dating apps like Grindr and Tinder, these apps are still quite popular among metropolitan users who use a virtual private network (VPN) to climb the firewall. Meanwhile, local apps thrive in the safe haven heavily guarded by China's internet regulations. Blued, for instance, has more than 40 million registered users worldwide, approximately 70% of whom are from China (Cao, 2018). In China alone, Blued has more than three million daily active users (Hernández, 2016).

Against this backdrop, I hope to understand how single metropolitan Chinese gay men develop social relationships on dating apps. In this chapter, I explore their use patterns, their expectations of online dating, and their understandings of casual sex, or sex outside the stereotypical romantic relationship. I analyze how these factors intermesh with the technological affordances of dating apps.

7 This chapter is a slightly altered version of Wu, S., & Ward, J. (2019). Looking for "interesting people": Chinese gay men's exploration of relationship development on dating apps. *Mobile Media & Communication*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157919888558

Before presenting my analysis, I first review the literature on the affordances of dating apps and gay users' sexual practices.

Affordances of Dating Apps

Affordances are derived from the interaction between subjective perceptions of utility and objective qualities of artefacts (Gibson, 1979). In media technology studies, the concept of affordances underlines the "mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action" (Majchrzak et al., 2013, p. 39). Regarding the affordances of dating apps, their technological capabilities are manifest most prominently through their interfaces. Although the browsing interfaces of dating apps are more or less different from each other, they can effectively be categorized into two types (see Figure 1), as mentioned in Chapter 1. One type allows the user to start a conversation by private messaging with any user displayed on the screen, such as Blued and Grindr. The other type entails a mechanism of signaling and matching, as private messaging is possible only when both users signal their interest, such as Aloha and Tinder.

Despite the differences between these types of apps, their shared affordances are rather salient when dating apps as a whole are compared to other media platforms. Comparison is possible in the sense that different objects enable certain affordances to different degrees (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). For instance, a mobile phone has a higher degree of portability than a laptop (Schrock, 2015). To understand the affordances of dating apps, researchers have compared dating apps with dating websites. Chan (2017) argues that five affordances differentiate dating apps from dating websites: (a) mobility, (b) proximity, (c) immediacy, (d) authenticity, and (e) visual dominance. First, dating apps afford mobility—they can be used anywhere at any time, since they run on portable devices such as smartphones and tablets. Second, while dating websites connect people in broader regions, dating apps connect users who are in each other's immediate proximity. Third, impromptu offline meeting, or immediacy, is more achievable on dating apps. Fourth, on many dating apps, users' accounts can be linked to other social media accounts (e.g., Facebook and Instagram), offering a certain level of authenticity. Finally, due to the interface designs of dating apps, which

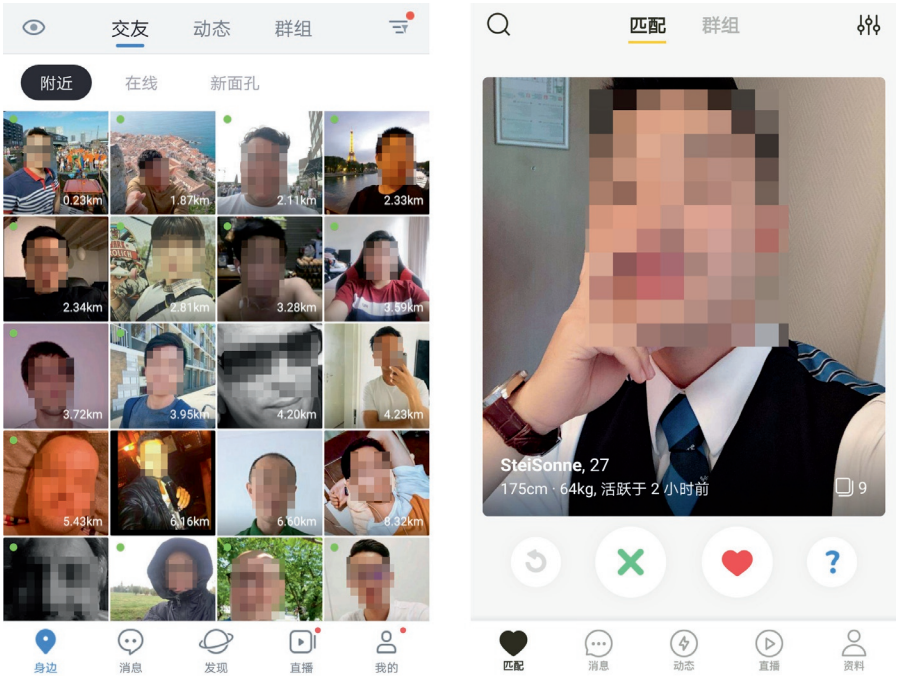


Figure 1. The screenshots show the interfaces of Blued (left) and Aloha (right), two dating apps developed by Chinese companies.

highlight users' profile pictures, dating apps are more visually dominated than dating websites. Lutz and Ranzini (2017) point out similar dating app affordances, and also note the presence of links to other social media accounts as further sources of identification.

These studies have two main limitations. First, dating apps are only compared to dating websites, not to other media platforms. In an environment of "polymedia" (Madianou, 2015) with abundant communicative opportunities offered by media technologies, people exploit the affordances of many different media platforms to manage their social relationships. Researchers have noted that dating app users tend to continue their interaction on other media platforms such as WhatsApp (MacKee, 2016; Ward, 2016). How the differences in affordances contribute to this platform switching needs to be examined. In this research, I place dating apps in a larger picture of polymedia, where the richness of media platforms enables platform switching in the course of relationship

development. By keeping an eye on platform switching, I aim to understand what dating apps can and cannot afford for gay men's relationship development.

Second, this comparative approach to affordances has been largely based on technological features and has neglected the nuances in users' subjective perceptions of technological utility. Since affordances arise where these two aspects intersect, researchers should also probe users' perceptions of what they are able to do with dating apps, as well as the underlying norms and values that set up a range of acceptable behaviors. These perceptions are inevitably linked to a negotiation of the relation between relationship development and casual sex. In the next section, I thus review relevant studies to capture the complexity in this negotiation (Licoppe et al., 2015).

Transformation in Gay Sexual Practices

In many studies on gay dating apps, engagement with casual sex seems to thwart the development of social relationships. Due to the affordances of visual dominance and synchronicity, dating apps are perceived by users to privilege casual sex and impede relationship development (Yeo & Fung, 2018). Those who look for "meaningful connections" are often frustrated (Brubaker et al., 2014). Licoppe et al. (2015) reveal that users who seek immediate sexual encounters tend to bypass relationship development with certain conversation strategies. They make the conversation impersonal by not referring to personal issues and biographical detail that may lead to social and emotional involvement. Seeming to run through a checklist, they swiftly exchange personal photos and information about their locations, immediate goals, and sexual preferences. This sex-oriented conversation can be seen as a form of "pragmatic conversation" (Eggins & Slade, 1997); it is in opposition to what Eggins and Slade call "casual conversation," the interaction that is not motivated by a clear pragmatic purpose.

Licoppe et al. (2015) seem to be sensitized to "no-strings-attached" sex by the phenomenon of "cruising," or searching in public places for sexual partners, which is a long-standing practice among men who have sex with men. By referencing "cruising," they try to understand how dating apps shape gay men's sexual practices. They argue that Grindr users experience an interactional

dilemma because they, "unlike people looking for sexual encounters in public places who can rely mostly on gaze and gesture, must use the medium of electronic conversation to initiate contact" (Licoppe et al., 2015, p. 2555). Indeed, unlike the classic "cruising" scenario in Humphreys's (1970) ethnographic research, where men silently engage in sex with strangers in public restrooms, a preceding chat process is indispensable on dating apps. As Race (2015b) maintains, chat mechanisms on dating apps enable various forms of controlled and anonymized self-disclosure—such as sexual interests and HIV status—before sexual encounters, constituting new modes of partner sorting and risk prevention. Chatting allows a possible, though always contingent, "process of establishing a sense of safety" (Albury & Byron, 2016, p. 1), and enables users to co-construct their sexual fantasies and make arrangements for their incoming sexual encounters (Race, 2015a, 2015b).

Besides the chat mechanisms, other affordances of dating apps constitute a transformative force in gay men's sexual practices. Most of all, the capacity to search users, add "buddies," and keep track of "favorites," allows sexual encounters with certain users to reoccur. As Race (2015b, p. 505) puts it: "The capacity to maintain a loose web of concurrent fuck-buddies is perhaps more available, more accessible and more widely accessed than ever." He argues that gay men gain affective bonds and affinities in online hook-ups: "These devices and practices are participating in the construction of a specific sphere of sociability and amiable acquaintances among men in urban centers that prioritizes sex as a principle mechanism for connection and sociability" (Race, 2015a, p. 271).

Race (2015a) draws on sociability theory from Simmel (1949) who argues that in all human associations, regardless of content and interests, there can be satisfaction in the association itself: changing individual solitude into togetherness. This satisfaction is derived from the "artful, autonomous play-form of sociation" (Anderson, 2015, p. 98)—or the "sociability," as termed by Simmel—in which "the concrete motives bound up with life-goals fall away" (Simmel, 1949, p. 255). Framing sex as "play," Race (2015a) addresses the social and affective function of sex and regards sex as a site for sociability.

Seeing these social and communal potentialities in sex, Race (2015a) challenges our understanding of casual sex that is dominated by the "no-strings-attached"

hook-up frame. This frame may lose its explanatory power when it comes to a broader landscape of gay men's dating app use. Users who look for casual sex can be open to romance, and vice versa (Chan, 2018; Yeo & Fung, 2018). Many tend to be flexible regarding their goals, which are often negotiated over time through interaction (Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018). Intentions for casual sex and social relationships can coexist (Birnholtz et al., 2014; Blackwell et al., 2015; MacKee, 2016). How do we understand the coexistence of casual sex and relationship development? How is this relation implicated in affordances of dating apps? How does this relation, together with the technological features of dating apps, shape gay users' experience of relationship development? With these questions, I explore how Chinese gay men experience relationship development on dating apps.

My findings in this chapter are based on my first wave of interviews in 2017 with 21 participants who were living or had lived in Beijing. Nevertheless, the findings were also confirmed in the second wave of interviews. Three themes emerged from the interviews: (a) sociability in casual conversations; (b) *relationalization* of casual sex; (c) platform switching for relationship potential. The first two themes are focused on how participants subjectively negotiated the relation between relationship development and casual sex, and help explain participants' exploitation of media affordances analyzed in the third theme. Before presenting the three main themes in detail, I report the prevailing mentality among the participants: the openness to all forms of relations. I asked the participants what their goals were in online dating when they were single. Their answers constitute a spectrum. On one end, Kaikai (26), a general manager assistant, was the only participant who sought "no-strings-attached" sex and firmly rejected any relationship development. He said it was because he was deeply hurt in previous relationships. On the other end, Xiaoduo (20), an undergraduate student, was the only participant who rejected casual sex, due to the risk of getting infected with sexually transmitted diseases. The other 19 participants were open to all sorts of relations—sexual or nonsexual—when they were single, although they had different priorities. Since this openness blurs the boundary between hook-up and "serious" dating in practice, I use the word "hook-up" (约炮) in narratives only when it was originally used by participants.

Sociability in Casual Conversations

As said earlier, gay users' exploration of app affordances features a negotiation of the relation between relationship development and casual sex. The first theme I present here characterizes this negotiation. According to participants, relationship development on dating apps depends on chatting. A "good chat" would prompt moves to further interaction, such as exchanging contact information and meeting offline. Interestingly, participants appreciated the pleasure of "casual conversations" (Eggins & Slade, 1997), which they cannot obtain from a pragmatic conversation aimed at a concrete goal, such as sex or fast acquisition of personal information. In that sense, they desired sociability (Simmel, 1949).

Sociability is realized in conversation (Simmel, 1949). For those participants who appreciated sociability in online dating, a "good chat" itself was a valuable experience. Shuai said that good chats kept him company during the "boring time of singlehood." Zhu (27), an employee of a mobile application development company, said: "I wish I can experience more interesting things. For me, to have a good one-zero relation (anal sex) is less interesting than to discover a gay story I've never heard." Participants perceived those with whom they could have a good chat as "interesting." An interesting chat tends to unfold around topics like common hobbies or experiences. Guo (22), a postgraduate student, said that interesting people he hooked up with on dating apps often had professions he found intriguing, such as editors and designers. Like Guo, many participants reported a preference for "interesting people." Xing (31), a high school teacher, said: "I used to follow the guys who are tall, muscular, or handsome. Now I pay more attention to those who are talented or cultured. That is to say: interesting people."

It bears noting that the *interesting people* Guo and Xing referred to were mainly well-educated "high-*suzhi*" subjects with rich cultural capital. After all, Guo and Xing received good education themselves—Xing graduated from Peking University—and were more likely to be attracted to those with a similar education level. They tended to admire those who specialize in a certain field and perhaps have some accomplishments. Xing mentioned that the friends made through dating apps were "elites in all walks of life":

> They are famous lawyers, famous designers, famous executives of big companies, project managers, writers, painters, and famous doctors. My friends have good taste and high *pinzhi*[8] (品质: quality). More often, we talk about books, arts, work, and life. We also talk about sex, but that's rare.

One may feel Xing was bragging about his "high-quality" gay network, but the pleasure he derived from socializing with high-*suzhi* subjects seems genuine. Moreover, the neoliberal value of self-improvement also plays a role, as one may aspire to gain more knowledge and broaden horizons by interacting with *interesting people*. This can be seen in how Guo described the typical positive dating experience he had: "After you meet him, there would be a lot to talk about. He may also recommend you many books to read." On the other hand, *interesting people* may possess or pursue knowledge that goes beyond their professional demands, seemingly transcending the material needs of mundane life and catering to neoliberal subjects' craving for being "extraordinary". For instance, Guo was impressed by a dating partner who was working for a fashion magazine but had extensively read books about food science. Ankang, however, complained about the lack of *interesting people* in his gay network. He set some of his straight male colleagues from the internet industry as an example to illustrate what *interesting people* are like. "They don't have an attractive appearance, and they may lead a life of getting married and raising children. But he [*sic*] may turn out to be a science fiction fan and explain the theory of relativity to you someday." In contrast, Ankang's gay acquaintances were too pragmatic in his eyes, as they were uniformly keen on fitness and skin care. Therefore, they were not *interesting*.

Compared to the "ordinary" others, the less pragmatic *interesting people* are more likely to offer sociability to their interlocutors. As Simmel argues, sociability in communication is above and beyond the purposive content which is bound up with the desire, for instance, to gain advantage over the other (Simmel, 1949). Participants regarded casual conversation—or in their own words, "a chat with little purpose" (目的性不强的聊天)—as the ideal communication. Guo elaborated on his preference for this form of chat:

8 In this context, *pinzhi* can be seen as a synonym for *suzhi*.

> I think there are many different types of conversations. One is purely purposive, such as those about borrowing money from me or hooking up with me. That means the person has a direct purpose. But I prefer the talk with no direct purpose. We'll see what we can chat about. For instance, you start with "hello," or say "wow, you also went to this exhibition." Then I'll feel I probably would like to sleep with this person, or be his friend, or maybe do something else. […] If he knows something which I also find interesting, and if he doesn't try to set a boundary for the conversation, then we will probably find more common hobbies when we chat freely.

The mentality revealed in Guo's account prevailed among the participants. A casual conversation establishes a connection between users, based on which one may develop further expectations about the other, be it sex or a relationship. Casual conversations go hand in hand with uncertainty of users' ultimate goals, and the uncertainty itself is intriguing. Fei (30), an advertising account manager, said that uncertainty is like a game. He said: "If the game's result turns out good, you may get your reward. If not, at least you have enjoyed the process." Fei's analogy echoes Simmel's argument that sociability is a "sociological play-form" (Simmel, 1949, p. 258) in which play itself takes an important role in sociability. The attraction of playing lies in the dynamics and chances of the activity itself, and "the freedom from all weight of firm content and residual reality" (Simmel, 1949, p. 258). Similarly, online dating will lose its fun if the interlocutor is obsessed with a concrete goal. Helan (25), a yoga teacher, claimed that people could spoil the fun by being too purpose-centered. Even for hook-ups, he believed that people should invest more in communication than in getting fast sex "like animals on the grassland."

Therefore, it is not surprising that many participants expressed their antipathy toward sex-oriented pragmatic conversations, which are highly instrumental. This type of conversation tends to start with an impersonal sex-related question, such as "hook-up?"; "are you 1 (top) or 0 (bottom)?"; "how big down there?"; or "do you have a place [to host]?" Many participants regarded the sex-oriented conversation as a sign of low *suzhi* (素质: quality). For instance, Taotao said that people with high *suzhi* were able to hold a "normal conversation" on dating apps, even though the conversation may lead to hook-ups in the end. He said:

> For instance, in the beginning you shouldn't say "what are you looking for", "I want to make love", "I want a hook-up", or "I'm itchy". You don't have to start with this. You can talk about other things first, like the gym or whatever. Many people are straightforward, but not me. I don't like being straightforward.

Certainly, conversations that eventually lead to casual sex can be less explicit and more tactful than this. However, a casual conversation is not about facilitating an immediate sexual encounter. For instance, Fei liked to compliment the interlocutor's appearance when he merely wanted sex. But when he saw a person with an interesting profile, he would lead the chat to topics about life. Luogang (23), a postgraduate student, also deemed a "good chat" as nonsexual: "When I'm interested in chatting, we can chat about anything, as long as it's not about sex. We can exchange our opinions on social issues."

Another form of pragmatic conversation, though not sex-centered, is the interrogative conversation. Some participants called it *cha hukou*[9] (查户口: household register check), which means that people ask private questions—about age, physical traits, profession, hobbies, or romance history—in a nonreciprocal, rigid, or aloof way. Based on that, the interrogative conversation seems to have a pragmatic purpose, which is to quickly judge if one is suitable as a dating partner. As Simmel claims, "as soon as the discussion gets business-like, it is no longer sociable" (Simmel, 1949, p. 259). Both Xiaoduo and Xing perceived the interrogative type of conversation as snobbishly categorizing people into social stereotypes. For Zhu, it was paradoxical that people did not want to be asked private questions. In his opinion, exchanging personal information was an important way to make the chat sustainable. However, Fei believed that there is a skill for asking questions appropriately:

> If your intention for asking questions is to bring us closer, you'd better give an answer in the first place. Like you said in the beginning: "Hello, my name is Wu Shangwei. What's your name?" Then I said, "my name is Fei." But if one person asks for my name abruptly, I will feel offended. What

9 This is a reference to China's *hukou* (户口: household registration) system. *Hukoubu*, or the household register, officially identifies a person as a resident of an area and includes identifying information such as name, parents, spouse, and date of birth.

> qualification do you have to ask me such a question? But some people just keep asking. "What's your profession? What's your height? What hobbies do you have? How many boyfriends have you had before?" This way of asking questions is like commanding, not like communicating.

Interesting people seem to master the skill of conversing amiably. They also master the self-governing that is prerequisite to sociability (Simmel, 1949) and aligns with neoliberal values. Leshan (21), an undergraduate student, said: "For instance, [they] speak in a humorous way, use polite expressions, and appropriately ask for information. I mean, [talk] in an artistic way, like with fencing: Don't do it like a fight where you use all the moves you know."

To summarize, participants expected sociability on dating apps. They wanted the exhilaration of a casual conversation with *interesting people* who are often high-*suzhi* subjects and the experience of momentary freedom from a reality fraught with calculated desires. Both sex-oriented conversations and interrogative conversations are too instrumental to generate sociability. Given the relatively new context of socializing enacted by dating apps, users still need to navigate appropriate expressions in online chatting.

Relationalization of Casual Sex

The second theme also focuses on negotiation in the subjective arena. Pursuit of sociability was not always the case, since participants sometimes also wanted immediate physical intimacy. They would then shorten the conversation and directly ask about the other's purposes. As Luogang said, he would even ask the question "hook-up?" which he usually hated. Nevertheless, in general, they tended to have more relational expectations for casual sex. In contrast to gay "cruising," casual sex for young Chinese single gay men bears more social meaning and relation functions and is thus *relationalized*. I conceptualize this phenomenon among single gay men as the "*relationalization* of casual sex." It consists of two subthemes: (a) casual sex is perceived as a form of social connection; (b) casual sex is endowed with relationship potential, or the potential to foster a relationship.

The first subtheme is related to participants' emotional or spiritual demands in casual sex. Xing said that the best hook-up was to find a person with whom he could feel "spiritually connected," a person who could please both his "spirit and body." Leshan described himself as "both physically and spiritually needy." Guo regarded the hook-up as a "spiritual handshake" with people whom he had good feelings about. Fei elaborated on his spiritual needs:

> I looked forward to hook-ups, but afterwards I often felt a sense of loss . . . It was only in recent years that I figured out I was not searching for bodily pleasure in sex, which though was one part [I sought] indeed. [Bodily pleasure] is just a small part. I want more mental and spiritual comfort. I mean, what I want in sex is a simulation of an intimate relationship via transient intimacy.

In this ideal hook-up described by participants, sociability spills into the intimate (sexual) connection, as many participants expressed their preference in hook-ups for "chattable" (聊得来的) people, with whom they could have a good chat before or after sex. Sansan (30), a lawyer, said he expected to hook up with interesting people who could offer "more things," that is, who could talk about arts, literature, history, philosophy, or economics with him. Peng (22), an undergraduate student, said he liked to have a "long heart-to-heart talk" (促膝长谈) with his sexual partners after sex.

The second subtheme reflects a common view: casual sex can be a starting point for establishing a social relationship, either a romantic relationship or a friendship. Therefore, those users who look for "no-strings-attached" sex, such as Kaikai, always need to strategically keep the conversation short on dating apps to signal their disinterest in relationship development. As reflected in many participant stories, a casual sex partner may eventually turn out to be "Mr. Right," or at least a friend.

Hook-ups are perceived as a fast track to a relationship. For Chong, relationship development based on mutual interests but without sex was slow. Echoing Chong, Xuesong (26), an unemployed graduate, believed that sexual relations are the easiest to establish, compared with friendships and romantic relationships: "Anything can start with a sexual relation." In his opinion, dating apps provide a

space where people can be frank about their gay identity and sexual desires, and where people can easily establish sexual relations. In contrast, the conventional sex-after-commitment path requires a much longer time for people to get to know each other's values, hobbies, and habits. In offline settings, this path may include a roundabout process of confirming each other's gay identity. Although regarding this path as romantic, Xuesong thought it was not efficient or practical. Similarly, Zhu expressed his doubts about the efficiency of the sex-after-commitment path:

> Heterosexuals […] would realize their attraction to the opposite sex in junior high school. In a simple environment like that, there is a big chance [for romance without sex]. *Gay* men are often enlightened quite late, and the chance for them to find each other is small. I'm after efficiency. I don't want to spend too much time imagining and pursuing the good thing that is unlikely to happen. So, you'd rather let it go. [...] Don't say that I can't have sex [before commitment], that I can't meet people via dating apps, or that I must stay on campus to wait for the "boy in the white shirt" to appear. That's not practical.

Since casual sex is regarded as a form of social connection and is expected to bear relational functions, single gay men are willing to spend time socializing with their potential sexual partners. They may have a long chat on dating apps before meeting in person. When they meet, they may have dinner, shop, or watch a movie before eventually having sex. In other words, socializing activities preceding sex are common in many hook-ups. *Relationalized* hook-ups can be so time- and energy-consuming that participants like Sansan would rather masturbate when they feel lazy.

Although a few participants reported that they had found boyfriends through hook-ups on dating apps, *relationalized* casual sex often ends in vain, especially when the two parties have insufficient communication. They may fall out quickly when there is no mutual willingness to engage in more socializing activities. Taotao's story reflects the whole course of a *relationalized* hook-up that ended up without an established relationship. Taotao said he was mainly looking for casual sex on dating apps, but he was open to the possibility of coming across Mr. Right. When asked about his "best" hook-up experience, he mentioned

a director of web series he met on Jack'd. They added each other on WeChat and had chatted for one week before they eventually had sex. Taotao liked this good-looking guy, who was well-spoken and had a good family background. In Taotao's eyes, he was aspiring and ambitious, not mediocre. Taotao also had "good sex" with him. However, their contact gradually faded. Taotao said he had no deep impression of that guy other than sex, which seemed to me more like a hindsight than his immediate feelings at the time. In other words, there were no more social activities between them to give Taotao a deeper impression. "If there are no more acts to establish intimacy, such as having a meal together, hanging out, [the contact] will fade gradually, especially the fragile relation initiated online, which is so easy to collapse." He sensed no expectations for relational development from the other party. That contributed to his decision to let it go. "I'm afraid of trouble. The simpler the relation, the better. The simple is the best."

Taotao was not alone. Indeed, in many cases, one party is more willing to further the relationship development than the other. The former may find it hard to quit the sexual relation without being disappointed, disillusioned, or emotionally hurt, as revealed in Ankang's and Fei's accounts. Although Ankang made some confidants via dating apps, he did not become close friends with those who had sex with him. "You know, [I] surely invested some emotions. Then I became possessive. I held a grudge [because of the nonreciprocity]." Fei was strongly attracted to his last two sexual partners. He felt emotionally repressed:

> If the other party cannot respond to my [emotional] expectations, then every single moment in the carnal interaction there will be a voice telling me: "this guy doesn't love you." In these moments, I feel hurt. Because I feel like I'm a vibrator on two legs, or a free *MB* [money boy].

To summarize, the openness to all potential relations is reflected in participants' preference for *relationalized* casual sex. "No-strings-attached" sex made these participants feel objectified, like they were merely an instrument used to satisfy others' sexual desire. Therefore, they preferred sexual encounters in which they could feel connection and intimacy.

Platform Switching for Relationship Potential

With the subjective negotiation revealed in the first two themes, gay users still need to use media platforms to develop a relationship. Regarding this, participants tended to change their contact platform to signal interest in relationship development: this action constituted the third theme. According to my participants, dating apps initiate—not maintain—relationships. Platform switching happens in the course of relationship development. To capture the relationship potential, participants tended to switch to WeChat, a mainstream social media application, after they had a good chat on the dating app. Nevertheless, participants always went back to dating apps for new potential relationships, especially when they were still single. This platform switching is intertwined with four affordances of dating apps and WeChat: on the one hand, leaving dating apps for WeChat is driven by communicative synchronicity and user identifiability on WeChat, as well as the negatively perceived sexual availability on dating apps; on the other hand, stranger connectivity on dating apps lures users to come back.

Communicative Synchronicity

Relationship development leads to a higher demand for synchronicity in mediated communication. Synchronicity on dating apps is relatively low, because their use is limited. The chance for timely contact is small on dating apps, especially on foreign apps that seemed to be blocked by China's "Great Firewall."

Another factor for the limited use of dating apps is their potential to give away one's gay identity. Coming out to someone is regarded as a sign of trust and closeness. Accordingly, app users may feel uncomfortable with being out to the acquaintances they are not close to in daily life. Yun (29), a doctor, felt embarrassed when he saw a colleague on an app who had never come out to him. He would never talk to this colleague on the app, since it would be "slapping him [the colleague] in the face." He said: "Because [your gay identity] is revealed without your consent. No one would want that." Taotao also noticed this in his own experience:

> In real life, you know each other, but you don't know each other's sexual orientation. And if you accidentally see each other on Blued—at least my own experience is like this—the other guy would always block me. Seems like [they] worry that I get to know something.

Compared to dating apps, WeChat affords more immediate and stable connection. With more than one billion monthly active users (Deng, 2018), WeChat is "an app for everything" (Chao, 2017), supporting instant messaging, social networking, ride hailing, movie-ticket booking, etc. It is deeply embedded in users' everyday life, and is often running in the background on one's smartphone. Therefore, participants expected higher synchronicity from WeChat than from dating apps. As Leshan said: "I think it is inconvenient if I reach you through the dating app. [...] I mean, I spend more time checking WeChat, right? I can't open the interface [of dating apps] all the time."

User identifiability

Both dating apps and WeChat have the affordance of user identifiability: users have profiles and can provide identity cues. Different from their Western equivalents but similar to WeChat, Chinese dating apps have integrated many functionalities of mainstream social media, allowing users to post status updates, follow each other, react to content, and so on. Even so, users of both Western dating apps and Chinese ones tend to switch to WeChat to gather more identity cues about others.

Nevertheless, platform switching is not necessarily about which app has a higher degree of user identifiability. Instead, it is more about seeing different sides of the same person. Participants held the view that people, including themselves, have left different identity cues on different platforms, since each platform has a different audience. Xiaoduo said:

> [On the dating app Aloha] I would post better looking pictures and think twice about the captions. […] It's not as casual as on WeChat. […] Because it's [also] unlike on Weibo [a Chinese microblogging platform] where you don't care who sees your posts. On Aloha you have a bigger chance to make friends, or even develop a further relation with your audience. So, you need to think more about what aspect of yourself you are going to present.

Helan also reported the difference in self-presentation on different platforms, which, however, differs from Xiaoduo's account. Helan regarded Blued, the dating app he was using, as a promiscuous place that was not worthy of effortful self-presentation. Instead, he preferred to post pictures and emotion statuses on WeChat for people he "cared about."

Participants believed that platform switching allowed them to collect more identity cues about the people they met on dating apps. Moreover, platform switching also allowed more self-disclosure to those in whom they were interested. WeChat allows users to categorize their contacts into different groups and lets posts be seen only by chosen groups. Yun exploited that functionality and posted specific content for the group of people he met on dating apps. He hoped to deepen their understanding of him and nourish the potential of "natural" relationship development.

As Guo said, switching to WeChat signals trust and the willingness to "step further," since it means more reciprocal self-disclosure. Nevertheless, in some cases, participants switched to WeChat at the request of their interlocutors before they had enough trust. WeChat allows users to block chosen contacts from seeing their posts: Zhu used to unblock his newly added WeChat contacts only after he knew enough about them. Some of them realized they were blocked when seeing no posts in Zhu's profile, so they questioned Zhu about this. In this case, blocking sent a signal of mistrust that seemed unusual after contact had been made on WeChat.

Sexual Availability

Many participants deemed dating apps an inappropriate environment for further communication, as they perceived dating apps as "too desire-oriented". Indeed, dating apps have the affordance of sexual availability: sex can be easily arranged via the apps. For participants, this affordance was implied by the design features. Ankang thought that visual dominance and the distance-sorted array of users on Grindr served the need of finding casual sexual partners. Wangli (28), working at an Internet company, echoed that users saw pictures as the primary form of communication. There would be little chance for further interaction if the pictures were unattractive. He compared using dating apps to shopping online: "If the advertisements cannot attract you, you will not have the

desire to buy." The profile settings on dating apps are also perceived negatively. Luogang thought that the profile settings on Blued, which required information about age, body measurements, and sexual preference (1 or 0: top or bottom), promoted a "quantitative way of thinking" that discouraged "deep talks." Shuai regarded the profile settings on Blued as sexually suggestive. He disliked this way of self-presentation which he likened to "selling livestock."

Participants also perceived the success rate of hook-ups to be higher than that of establishing social relationships via dating apps. Wangli said he was mainly looking for casual sex on dating apps: "I'm not saying that I have closed the doors to other possibilities. I just feel that the only relation that has ever developed on dating apps for me is the hook-up relation." Taotao did not count on dating apps to find someone with whom he could "spiritually resonate." He said dating apps have brought together gay men of different social strata, which made it hard for him to find someone similar to himself. Therefore, he regarded "dealing with sexual desire" as the most prominent affordance of dating apps. Because of dating apps' affordance of sexual availability, participants switched to WeChat when they were willing to develop the relation with the other party. As Shuai said, he preferred a "normal channel" for further interaction.

Stranger Connectivity

Dating apps have the affordance of stranger connectivity. By bringing strangers together, they create potential for new relationships. This affordance is often intensified by the large population in a metropolis such as Beijing (see Figure 2), which has a population of more than 21 million (Westcott, 2018). Dating apps function as "a pool of alternatives" (Bauman, 1993, p. 108), where users keep going back for more opportunities. Many participants said that they were chasing the "novelty" in socializing with other gay men. Sang (23), a postgraduate student, said that he was attracted to novelty. He felt bored after he got to know the "behavior patterns" of a person and developed a "communication mode" with that person. Taotao regarded "novelty" as an important factor in why he pursued hook-ups: "I think it is about the sense of novelty. It's out of the evil of humanity. I would feel that there seem to be better [options]." Chuan held a similar opinion. For him, he wouldn't stop looking for new sexual partners even though he had found many: "Because one is always searching for novelty. […] Besides, who knows the next one won't be *the perfect one*?"

Location	Type of Location	Time	Number of online/offline users within a 1-km radius
22nd Building, Panjiayuan, Chaoyang District, Southeast Beijing	residential building	10:54 AM	569
Fenghuanghui, Chaoyang District, Northeast Beijing	shopping street	12:54 PM	538
Renmin University of China, Haidian District, Northwest Beijing	university	04:22 PM	630

Figure 2. Observations made on Blued on 5 January 2018. When in Rotterdam, I also observed several times on Grindr to see how many users there were within a 1-km radius. Usually there were approximately 100 users. Rotterdam is the 2nd largest city in the Netherlands.

Parallel to the pursuit of novelty is the short lifespan of most relations initiated on dating apps. It is rare, though not impossible, that two strangers eventually become close friends or partners. According to the participants, most people they connected with remained mere WeChat contacts. They only occasionally clicked "like" for each other's posts. One reason was that their lives did not intersect. Fei reckoned the lack of common friends made it hard for dating app contacts to maintain their relation. Xiaoduo felt it was hard to mingle with people he met on dating apps, even those who were studying in the same university. Lixiang (25), a postgraduate student, felt lonely about being a gay man and hoped to confide in some friends he had made through dating apps. However, it was hard for him to initiate a chat again. Consequently, and paradoxically, a solution for the loss of connection is to find new connections on dating apps. Participants kept going back to dating apps in the hope that they could enjoy sociability again.

To conclude, participants were shuttling between dating apps and WeChat, experiencing the whole course of a gay relation, from its initiation on dating apps to its maturation or decline on WeChat. Dating apps played an important but limited role in participants' gay social relations. As Fei said: "Dating apps have their own specialties. […] They can leave the rest to others and maximize their usefulness in ice-breaking."

Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to understand the role dating app affordances play in relationship development experienced by urban gay singles in China. I argue that researchers should account for not only the technological features of the apps, but also users' negotiation of the relation between relationship development and casual sex. Regarding the latter, I have found that single gay users in Chinese metropolises tend to be open to all possible relations, sexual or nonsexual. This mentality is also captured in Chan's (2018) study on gay men's dating app use. I agree with Chan that "being open" on dating apps helps users capture relationship potential. What I disagree with is his interpretation of this openness[3] as a conscious tactic that implies a pragmatic connotation, since gay users also appreciate the non-pragmatic pleasure of socializing with *interesting people*. In fact, in another study on Chinese heterosexual users of the dating app Momo, Chan frames the expectation for sociability as "anti-purposefulness" and argues that users are against an instrumental rationality (Chan, 2019), contradicting his own argument that openness is a tactic. No matter what, being open to all possible results and not fixated on a concrete goal is deemed the most appropriate way to chat and thus lead to relationship development[10]. By being less purpose-centered in chatting, gay users are better positioned to attain

10 Chan (2018, 2019) suggests this openness is due to the Chinese notion of efficacy, which relies on "the potential of situation", which is distinct from the Western means-end relations. However, many Western gay users of dating apps also tend to be open in the first place and negotiate their goals in the communication process (see Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018), which aligns with my observations in the Netherlands. Chan also suggests that this openness is related to the circulation of The Art of War written in the 6th century BC by Sun Tzu. He says: "If app users do not have a rigid goal or expectation in mind, they will never fail. This similarity between app users' strategy and Sun Tzu's teaching is not accidental: the teaching of Sun Tzu has already been integrated into contemporary management and economic teaching and practices (e.g. Rarick, 1996; Wee, 2016). The mentality of 'open to' is an extension of the neoliberal business strategy that emphasizes changes and flexibility" (Chan, 2018, p. 2576). This argument is flawed. First, one should not arbitrarily assume there is an association between a prevalent dating strategy and the neoliberal business strategy. Second, it is unlikely that the neoliberal business strategy had waited till Sun Tzu's teaching brought the notion of flexibility or openness to it. Instead, it is more likely that people who wanted to emphasize the importance of flexibility rediscovered Sun Tzu's words and referenced it for business practices. Therefore, we can say that the similarity between the mentality of openness in dating app use and Sun Tzu's teaching is nothing more than a coincidence.

sociability. In a good chat, gay users manage their desires and patiently attend to their interlocutors. Then, at least temporarily, sociability is achieved.

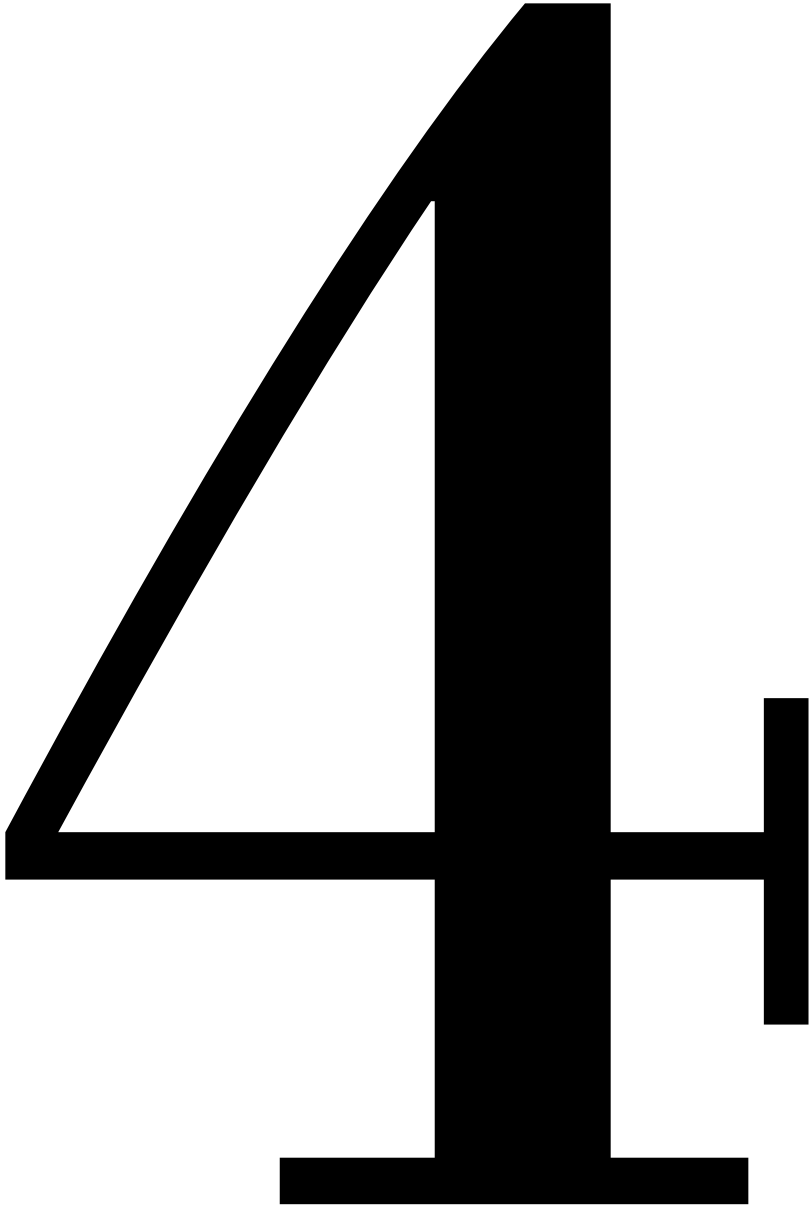
Nevertheless, the realization of sociability in gay users' experiences seems to be confined to a certain group of people: the *interesting people*. The definition of *interesting people* is shaped by neoliberal values and aligns with the *suzhi* discourse. These people are perceived as high-*suzhi*. They are well educated and indoctrinated with the beliefs of self-governance, self-improvement, and self-achievement neoliberalism cheers for. Their interlocutors who also aspire for self-improvement may expect them to offer some new knowledge and share interesting experiences. For doing so, they need to have abundant knowledge of their professions or hobbies and be willing to share it. They need to have received adequate education such that they can be good at interpreting the meaning of their life experiences and generating witty thoughts. Considering the above, *interesting people* basically come from the members of middle and upper classes that hold beliefs about neoliberal self. Therefore, pursuing the sociability in online dating should not be seen as push-back against the neoliberalization of Chinese intimacy as Chan (2019) suggests. Instead, in an unexpected way it signals the colonization of intimacy by neoliberalism through the discursive environment where beliefs about the neoliberal self are promoted.

Relationship development on dating apps is often driven by casual conversation. This finding is in line with Eggins and Slade's (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 16) argument about "the paradox of casual conversation." Trivial and purposeless as it may seem, casual conversation constructs social reality and is a critical site for "negotiating social identity and interpersonal relationships" (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 9). For gay users, it serves the function of screening potential partners or friends. In contrast, conversations deemed highly instrumental are unlikely to facilitate relationship development: either the interrogative conversation or the sex-oriented conversation. Specifically in the Chinese context, the sex-oriented conversation is seen as a sign of low *suzhi*; a high-*suzhi* subject is supposed to have good manners and manage his desires properly even in a digital space full of sexual tension. From an opposite angle, my study confirms Licoppe et al.'s (2015) finding that gay users who prioritize immediate sex over relationship development tend to hold sex-oriented checklist conversations rather than casual conversations.

The literature on gay dating app studies has shed light upon the tension between casual sex and relationship development (e.g., Licoppe et al., 2015; Yeo & Fung, 2018). My contribution is that I show the possible coexistence of casual sex and relationship development, which is due to single gay users' openness to both sexual and nonsexual relations. Rather than the "no-strings-attached" sex, users who are open to all possible relations prefer what I call "*relationalized* casual sex"—sex as a form of social connection that is endowed with relationship potential. Instead of impersonal sex which makes people feel objectified, single gay users may prefer "sex with connection"—people appreciate the uniqueness of their sexual partners and embrace the potential of a relationship with them. *Relationalized* casual sex involves a selection mechanism based on chatting, as the pleasure derived from chatting contributes to users' willingness to have sex. In this sense, "casual sex" arranged via dating apps is more than casual.

Users are well aware of the differences in affordances of different platforms. Echoing MacKee's (2016) study, my findings suggest that platform switching takes place when a certain degree of intimacy between two users has been reached. More than that, platform switching can be seen as a strategy for capturing relationship potential. As the connection develops, users have higher demands for communicative synchronicity and user identifiability, which can be satisfied by switching to mainstream social media like WeChat. Furthermore, since dating apps are stigmatized for their affordance of sexual availability, platform switching signals the openness to relationship development and mutual trust. Nevertheless, the momentum of relationship development initiated on dating apps often declines rapidly. Users keep going back to dating apps for the affordance of stranger connectivity, or the possibilities of new connections. Therefore, although dating apps seem to provide users with "the capacity to maintain a loose web of fuckbuddies" (Race, 2015a, p. 271), this capacity may not be exploited by single gay men in a metropolis. The large population of the metropolis enhances the stranger connectivity of location-based dating apps, which further increases single gay men's chance to find sexual/romantic partners. Under this condition, sticking with a regular fuck buddy—who is either not good enough to be a boyfriend or not interested in being one—probably equals losing time they could spend on exploring new sexual encounters or finding romance. In this sense, dating apps' stranger connectivity seems to undermine the likelihood of maintaining regular sexual partnerships while increasing the

possibility of finding romantic relationships. In light of this, dating apps tend to dwell in the initiation, rather than the maintenance, of Chinese gay men's social relationships.



Chapter 4

Domesticating Dating Apps for Relationships

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 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.[11]

This story comes from *Looking*, an American TV series. It carries multifold messages that resonate with the topic of this chapter. 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 associated dating apps with infidelity. Studies based in Australia, Belgium, and the United States show that some non-single users have had extradyadic sexual/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

11 This chapter is a slightly altered version of an article accepted for publication as Wu, S. Domesticating dating apps: Non-single Chinese gay men's dating app use and negotiations of relational boundaries. *Media, Culture & Society*.

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, 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.

During this study, 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 affordances of dating apps? If not, how do they mitigate the threat of sexual/romantic alternatives, symbolized by dating apps, to their relationship?

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 the incorporation of technology 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

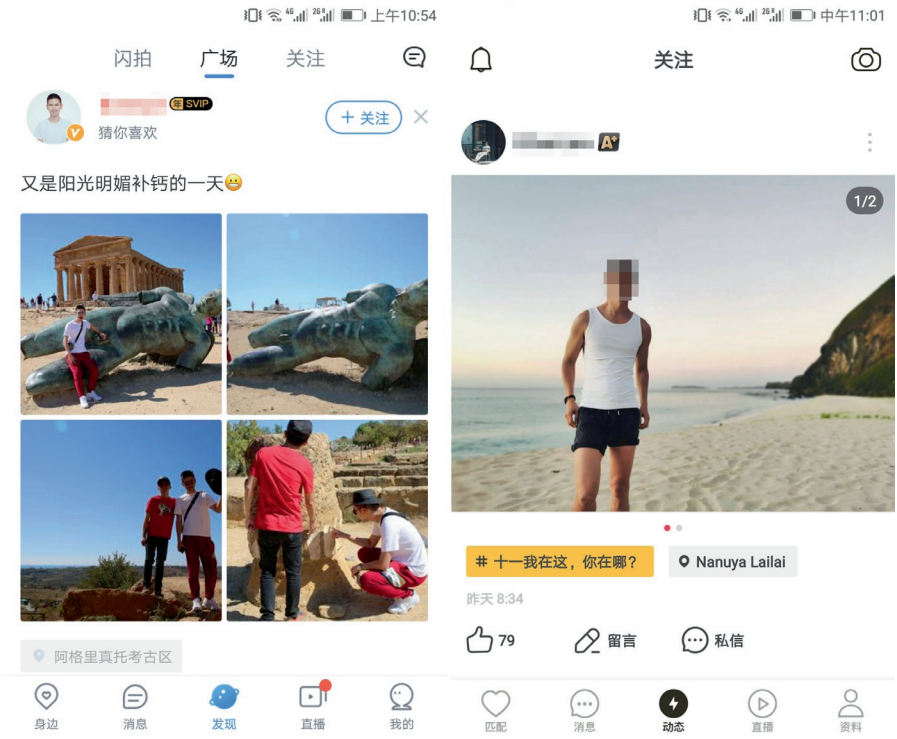


Figure 1. Displayed here are the social feeds on Blued (left) and Aloha (right), the most popular gay dating apps in China. Both apps allow users to post textual or pictorial statuses. Any other user can comment on or forward these statuses.

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 and for romantic relationships? For the broader project of my PhD thesis, examination of this domestication process may tell us more about how the neoliberal beliefs about relationships and the self are embodied in Chinese gay men's romantic relationships, and how the possible reformation of intimate relationships unfolds for gay men. Before presenting the findings, I first provide a review on domestication theory and its application in the next section.

Domestication Theory and Its Application

Researchers apply domestication theory in studies on how media technologies are integrated into users' daily routines, values, and environment (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, Hirsch, and Morley (1992) identify four phases of domestication: (a) appropriation, or bringing media technologies into the household; (b) objectification, or placing the physical artefacts 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 artefacts, such as computer software, TV programs, and so on (Silverstone et al., 1992). In line with that, recent studies have paid attention to smartphone applications (de Reuver et al., 2016; Møller & 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 artefact. Third, domestication entails a cognitive process which 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 (e.g. 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 chapter 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 towards dating apps and their expectations for future relationships.

Next, I present the findings in three sections: (a) motives & uses; (b) negotiations & rules; (c) meanings & agency. The first section presents 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. Overall, urban middle-class Chinese gay men's domestication of dating apps for romantic relationships is consistent with the neoliberal values of autonomy and self-governance.

Motives & 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), 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[12]. Nevertheless, these motives and uses generally construct a dual role of dating apps: a pool of sexual/romantic alternatives and a channel to the gay community.

Participants were aware that dating apps can function as a pool of sexual/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 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:

12 In romantic relationships, dating apps can also be used for partner surveillance, the same as other social media platforms such as Facebook (Punyanunt-Carter & Wrench, 2017). Given that partner surveillance goes against the appropriation of dating apps for the romantic relationship and that only a few participants had the experience, I do not discuss it in detail in this chapter.

> 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 two 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 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 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. Boshi said: "Every time [you] go to a place, you're very curious about the distribution of gay men there." Similarly, Gaoxing 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 costume 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. Its users 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), an undergraduate 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 & 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 have a separate discussion on 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. 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 & 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. 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. The notion of "not being controlling" also shows that autonomy is valued in a romantic relationship.

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 strategies to soften the negotiation.

Others may adopt different strategies. In Boshi's last relationship, his partner took the initiative in deleting dating apps. "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 the 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 & 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 Dongchen 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. This can be seen in Jiangshan's experience. Jiangshan was also in an open relationship. His boyfriend followed his regular account on Blued and sometimes got jealous when seeing Jiangshan being active there. Thus, Jiangshan signed up for an extra account to avoid the "surveillance".

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, Laijun (22), an unemployed graduate, 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 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 me getting 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.

In a special case reported by Shuai, he openly suggested his boyfriend Brad, an American expatriate living in Beijing, to use dating apps.[13] For Brad, dating apps were an important channel for making friends in Beijing. There was a time many friends of Brad's, who were also expatriates, returned to their home countries. Perhaps feeling lonelier than before, Brad was very upset about it. Then Shuai said to Brad: "If you think it's necessary, you can use the apps to make more friends. I don't mind." Shuai told me that he trusted Brad because he knew Brad was a sweet guy, a "herbivore". In fact, on another occasion they expressed to each other that an open relationship was not acceptable. Therefore, the boundaries were quite clear, and the corresponding rules were evident. In this case, suggesting non-sexual use was also confirming the boundaries of 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

13 Shuai preferred open discussions about relational boundaries. He said: "One good thing about having a relationship with a foreigner is that your communication about the relationship will be very clear. There won't be a mess. Chinese people like playing with ambiguity in relationships and won't clarify both parties' *duty* and the boundaries." Shuai thought many Chinese gay men did not know the importance of open negotiations. "Either they assume 'you are my possession' and you can't [have a close connection with] anyone else, or they are using dating apps themselves even when they are in a relationship." Although we should not conclude that ambiguity is inherent to the Chinese culture, the lack of open discussions about relational boundaries seems not rare among Chinese gay couples according to Shuai's words.

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 & 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/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, Laijun 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/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 employed sociological or psychological framing. 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/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 towards dating apps had changed as they became more experienced in relationships. Laijun 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 Laijun. "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/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 five-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.

In a nutshell, regarding dating apps' possible influences on a romantic relationship, Chinese gay men's tendency to hold the individual—instead of dating apps and the socio-technical environment—accountable aligns with the neoliberal emphasis on self-governance and self-responsibility. It was not accidental that the participants mentioned above adopted the sociological or psychological framing. After all, they were well-educated high-*suzhi* subjects, familiar with sociological and psychological reasonings that they accessed through higher education, as well as the middle-class cultural environment where relationship counseling is booming (e.g., Alexy, 2011).

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. 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 artefacts.

This chapter shows how the domestication of dating apps in Chinese gay men's romantic relationships unfolds on the above-mentioned four dimensions.

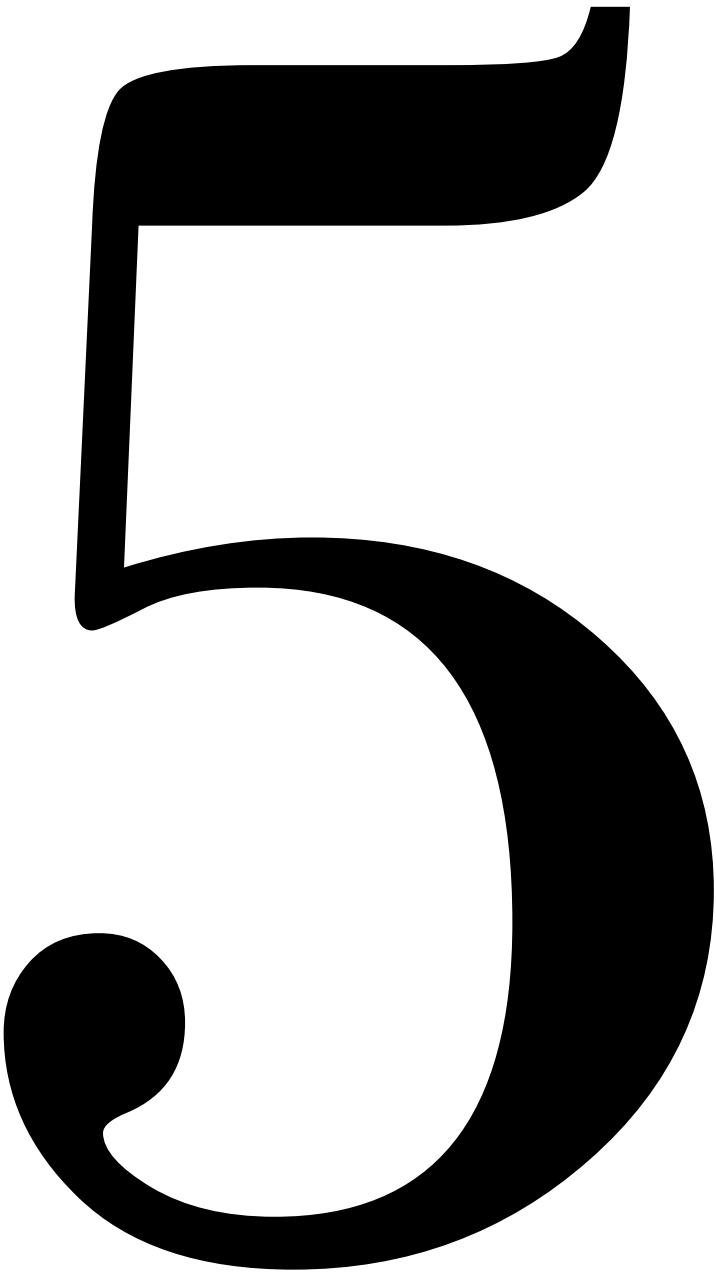
Practically, non-single users' various motives and uses construct dating apps' dual role as a pool of sexual/romantic alternatives and a channel to the gay community. Although the former may pose a threat to romantic relationships, the latter leaves room for the negotiation between the couple for acceptable but restricted usage. Monogamous couples may manage to deactivate dating apps' sexual/romantic role and retain their communal role. The fact that dating apps assume the 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.

It is noteworthy that Chinese gay men have avoided a deterministic view regarding dating apps' influence on romantic relationships. This falls in line with neoliberal values, as the individuals are supposed and believed to be free and autonomous. 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 not desirable neoliberal subjects. 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 is 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.



Chapter 5

Structures of Desire Hosted by Dating Apps

In Chapter 3 and 4, I have shown the general patterns in Chinese gay men's dating app use in singlehood and in relationships. I do not focus on one particular app, because there is an abundance of dating apps for gay men, including Blued, Grindr, Hornet, Jack'd, Scruff, and Tinder. On the other hand, in such a polymedia environment (Madianou, 2014) where one can access an array of dating apps, how gay men differentiate these apps and prioritize them for different communicative purposes also needs to be studied. Previous studies have shown signs of differentiation. On the one hand, divisions exist among user groups clustered around different apps. Dividing lines can align with the borders of subgroups within the queer community, as shown in how the app Scruff is targeted at the "bear" group (Roth, 2014). They can also overlap with national borders, for instance in how the Chinese app Blued thrives in the heavily protected internet market in China. The former case benefits from the steering role of marketing strategies, and the latter operates through the dividing force of local governmental regulations.[14]

On the other hand, the ways gay men use these apps also seem to differ. As revealed in MacKee's (2016) London-based study, gay men use Tinder mainly for "serious" dating, while they often use Grindr for hook-ups. This partly results from the different design features of these two apps. At the time when MacKee's study was conducted, Tinder required users to login with their Facebook accounts, importing profile pictures directly from Facebook; it also encouraged users to link their profiles to Instagram accounts. This constituted an identity verification mechanism that discouraged users to either behave or present themselves in a hyper-sexualized manner. Although Tinder now allows users to sign up with their phone numbers, whether this influences the established dating patterns remains to be researched. In comparison, Grindr affords higher anonymity, making users feel more comfortable presenting themselves sexually; its distance-sorted design provides convenience for immediate hook-ups (Licoppe et al., 2015; MacKee, 2016). Thus, one can conclude that the design features of dating apps significantly influence gay users' dating practices.

14 This chapter is a slightly altered version of an article under review as Wu, S., & Trottier, D. Constructing structures of desire: Chinese gay men's dating practices among pluralized dating apps. *Social Media + Society*.

The division among user groups and the differentiation of practical priorities indicate that certain structures can be found in gay men's online dating practices. In other words, these practices possess some enduring patterns of gay men's desiring and being desired. By shaping the landscape of dating apps, factors like marketing strategies of app companies, local governmental regulations, and design features of dating apps—which themselves are shaped by the former two factors—participate in the shaping of the structures in online dating practices. To explore these structures is to understand how technological, commercial, and regulatory forces shape gay men's collective sexual life (Green, 2014a).

This chapter explores the above-mentioned shaping process. Drawing on sexual field theory (Green, 2008; Martin & George, 2006), I frame dating apps as "sites of the sexual field" and the above-mentioned structures as "structures of desire". As I mentioned earlier, China has witnessed both the dominance of local dating apps and the resilience of foreign apps. As localization and globalization together shape the landscape of dating apps, structures of desire in online dating are also subject to these two trends. Indeed, not only is the national context highly determining, but this context itself may be shaped by tensions, for instance, between rural and urban populations, and across social strata. In other words, it makes sense to present the dating app scene in China as pluralized, where local/global tensions co-exist with local/local ones.

Considering the above, research questions to be answered in this chapter are: What are the prominent features of the structures of desire in Chinese gay men's online dating practices, and how are these structures of desire shaped by dating apps? In the next two sections, I review the literature on sexual field theory, define *structures of desire*, and frame dating apps as virtual sites of the sexual field.

Sexual Field Theory and Structures of Desire

Sexual field theory conceptualizes the highly structured systems of sexual stratification in collective sexual life, which consists of a terrain of erotic worlds respectively organized by intimate partnership and sexual pleasure yet with their own particular institutional and subcultural characters (Green, 2008, 2014a). These erotic worlds constitute a sexual field that is connected to but

also autonomous from other social fields (e.g., cultural fields, political fields, etc.). Actors in the sexual field congregate for social and sexual connections with others, from immediate sex to marriage (Green, 2014a). As Green (Green, 2008) argues, the sexual field materializes in physical and virtual sites that commonly include bars, nightclubs, and Internet chat rooms. Accordingly, dating apps can be seen as virtual sites of the sexual field.

The sexual field can be seen as pluralized. As Green argues (Green, 2014b, p. 27):

> A sexual field emerges when a subset of actors with potential romantic or sexual interest orient themselves toward one another according to a logic of desirability imminent to their collective relations and this logic produces, to greater and lesser degrees, a system of stratification.

In this sense, the sexual field contains many subfields that are defined by their own unique logics of desirability. This pluralized form of sexual field is featured with the similarly plural *structures of desire*, which Green (2014a: 14) defines as "site-specific, transpersonal valuations of attractiveness that coordinate desirability". Produced by the overlapping erotic habitus of field actors, a structure of desire establishes a particular hegemonic currency of sexual capital in a given sexual field, stratifying sexual actors in hierarchies of desirability (Adam, 2014; Green, 2008). Sexual capital, sometimes also called erotic capital, refers to the quality and quantity of attributes that an individual possesses, which elicit an erotic response in another (Green, 2008). It accrues to individuals and groups along at least three intersecting axes: (a) the appearance of the face and body; (b) affect, surmised in gestural repertoires that communicate masculinity and femininity; and (c) sociocultural style, reflected in dress and accessories that communicate race, class, gender, age, lifestyle, and sensibility (Green, 2008, 2014b) . The acquirable social components of sexual capital suggest the interconvertibility of different types of capital; sexual capital is interrelated with, though not reducible to, other kinds of sociocultural and economic forms of capital. In line with this, there may exist some overlap between structures of desire and the larger systems of social stratification, although they are not entirely isomorphic (Green, 2008).

As one of the main advocates of sexual field theory, Green (2014a) expects it to account for an array of sexual practices, from casual sex to long-term partnerships. Based on his vision, I further articulate that there exist multiple forms of desire in the sexual field, with each form being a configuration of the interests in different dimensions, such as the bodily and the affective dimensions. For instance, casual sex may result from a configuration of sufficient bodily interest and insufficient affective interest, while a romantic relationship may require the sufficiency in both bodily and affective interest. Therefore, field actors need to sort out their desires for others. In this process, which I call *desire sorting*, one must decide not only *how desirable* another actor is, but desirable *in what sense*. As far as I understand, proponents of sexual field theory have thus far neglected this desire sorting process; early empirical studies on structures of desire have not specified which form of desire prevails on a given site (e.g., Green, 2008; Scheim et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, the way Green (2014b) uses the concept of "sexual capital" does not always conform to his broad vision for sexual field theory. He argues that in some cases, "sexual fields can be more or less isomorphic with system-wide patterns of social stratification depending on the degree to which the field's status structure revolves around sexual capital" (Green, 2014b, p. 34). He uses the example of the dating websites where users are marriage-minded, arguing that the economic and cultural capital can be as or more important sexual capital for these users (Green, 2014b). Although modern marriages do not always fit into Gidden's (1992) model of pure relationship which is based on sexual and emotional equality and satisfaction, Green's argument risks reducing sexual capital to the components that arouse bodily desire rather than romantic or marital interests. Again, the scope of desire is confined to bodily desire.

To strengthen sexual field theory, more attention should be paid to the possible forms of desire on a specific sexual site. I thus redefine *structures of desire* as not just the transpersonal valuations of desirability, but also the dominance of particular desires that coordinate actors' expectations and practices. The stronger the dominance of any particular desire, the simpler the desire sorting process. For instance, on immediate-sex sites such as cruising places for men who have sex with men (MSM), bodily interest prevails over romantic interest. In contrast, in a less specialized scenario, such as an ordinary bar, the possibilities of both casual

sex and "serious dating" complicate *desire sorting*. For the actor, their desire may depend on another actor's configuration of sexual capital.

Therefore, when examining the structure of desire on a specific site, researchers should also pay attention to the particular form(s) of desire that tends to prevail, as well as how certain forms of sexual capital arouse certain forms of desire.

Dating Apps as Virtual Sites of Sexual Field

Sexual fields are anchored to both physical and virtual sites (Green, 2008). In the digitally mediated sexual field, two opposite trends co-exist. On the one hand, communication technologies bring awareness of and easy access to potential partners and sexual scenes across a diverse and ever-widening expanse of social and physical geography (Green, 2014a). On the other hand, this diversification is counterbalanced by an unprecedented degree of field specialization facilitated by the internet, as the actors online are encouraged to exercise sexual preference structures around a highly particular set of desired characteristics, demographic and/or physical, and erotic themes (Green, 2014a).

These two trends can be detected in the online dating scenarios facilitated by dating apps. Technically, a dating app can connect users with different demographic characteristics to each other in a certain area. However, the proliferation of dating apps also facilitates field specialization. Among other factors, design features of dating apps, marketing strategies aimed at different user groups, and local internet regulations together fragment the digitally mediated sexual field, creating niches for users with different sexual interests. By choosing between different dating apps, users are mapping the sexual field, trying to find the niches for their own sexual interests, and tapping into the structures of desire on those apps. For instance, MacKee's (2016) study shows that Grindr and Tinder present different structures of desire to gay users: Desire for immediate casual sex prevails on Grindr, while interest in "serious" dating congregates on Tinder.

While actors in a given sexual field often perceive the stratification of desirability, I also expect there is a *stratification of desires* in the digitally mediated gay sexual

field, with some forms of desires being more desirable and others being less. This expectation is based on my findings in Chapter 3. As I argue, urban gay singles tend to be open to all possible relations, both the sexual and the "serious". Even for casual sex, they preferred "*relationalized* casual sex", which is perceived as a form of social connection and endowed with the potential to foster a relationship, to the no-strings-attached casual sex. How the stratification of desires interplays with the structures of desire remains to be studied.

Considering the above, I aim to examine the structures of desire hosted by different dating apps to metropolitan middle-class Chinese gay users. Given the demographic features of my participants, my findings are mainly about metropolitan middle-class gay men who are in their 20s or 30s. I expect that the design features of dating apps take part in the shaping of these structures of desire, as they make some desires easier to satisfy by facilitating some forms of activities; other desires may remain dormant given the lack of possibility of activity. While I examine the structures of desire on dating apps, I also pay attention to the stratification of desires. My findings are organized into three sections, which respectively focus on: (a) the folk concepts *suzhi* and *zhiliang*; (b) the Chinese apps Blued and Aloha; (c) the foreign apps Grindr and Tinder. I first discuss *suzhi* and *zhiliang*, which are the local expressions of sexual capital and embody the stratification of desirability. When comparing different dating apps, metropolitan middle-class gay men are often comparing the *suzhi* and *zhiliang* of different user groups. After that, I reveal how Blued and Aloha, two local dating apps that are frequently compared to each other, host different structures of desire. Finally, I look at how Grindr and Tinder, two foreign apps that have experienced thwarted local integration, are constructed as small cosmopolitan sites of a sub field for gay men with transnational horizons or experiences.

Stratifying User Quality: *Suzhi* and *Zhiliang*

Structures of desire in gay mobile dating are partly manifest in gay users' comparison of the overall "qualities" of the users of different dating apps. From my interviews, two concepts related to "quality" emerged: *suzhi* (素质) and *zhiliang* (质量). Although both words can be translated as "quality", they

implicate different aspects of desirability and thus are different configurations of sexual capital.

Suzhi

As mentioned in Chapter 2, *suzhi* is a local expression of neoliberal values, a prominent term in public discourse circulating between the Chinese government, media, and citizens. It often refers to "the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct" (Jacka, 2009: 524), relating other concepts like "civilization" and "modernity". Embedded in neoliberalized China's official civilizing project that is aimed at cultivating moral, responsible citizens, the concept of *suzhi* is often adopted by the urban middle class, serving the othering of the lower social classes such as peasants and rural migrants, who are often described as "low-*suzhi*" (Tomba, 2009). This concept has also been circulating within the Chinese queer community, as previous studies have shown that urban middle-class gay men use the discourse of *suzhi* to exclude "money boys" (male prostitutes) with rural backgrounds from the queer community (Ho, 2010; Rofel, 2007; Wei, 2012). However, these studies were conducted before the emergence of dating apps. My findings suggest both continuity and discontinuity in how urban gay men use *suzhi* to stratify the desirability of a queer subject.

The continuity is mainly reflected in the emphasis placed on civility by participants when they talked about *suzhi*, which was in line with how *suzhi* is discussed in the broader public realm. Shuai even referenced a case outside the queer community: "There is a saying that some Chinese mainlanders have no *suzhi*. When visiting Hong Kong, their kids pee and poo on the street. This is called 'low *suzhi*'." In gay online dating, civility connotated by *suzhi* is often reflected in how people communicate and interact. Luogang said that *suzhi* is reflected in two aspects: "One is the self-cultivation and appropriate speech we often talk about. The other is about knowing and obeying the unwritten rules on social media, such as 'no pic no reply' [on dating apps]." Courtesy is an important component of *suzhi*. According to Taotao, people with high *suzhi* would not ignore the received messages or only reply after a long time once the conversation had begun; they would not curse or swear when they encounter rejections. Moreover, they should not send or ask for nudes when starting a conversation. As I have shown in Chapter 3, sex-oriented pragmatic

conversations can be seen as a sign of low *suzhi*. Given that they tend to happen in impersonal immediate hook-ups (Licoppe et al., 2015), users who seek for impersonal immediate sex might be perceived to have low *suzhi*.

Regarding the discontinuity in the use of *suzhi*, the urban/rural division mentioned in previous studies was absent in participants' accounts. When I shared this impression with Taotao, he said he had never associated the word *suzhi* with male prostitutes or users with rural backgrounds. He jokingly said: "I think even money boys have much *suzhi*. […] If they are not polite, they will make their clients unhappy. That will be their own loss." Indeed, unpleasant conversations on dating apps associated with low *suzhi* are not necessarily initiated by users with rural backgrounds. Moreover, most participants were not native to the cities where they currently lived; they themselves had migrated from their provincial hometowns to the metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai for university education or job opportunities. To Taotao, who came from a county-level city in Hubei province and currently lived in Beijing, one's native place and his past did not really matter: "I only focus on your current state, like whether you have appropriate speech, and whether you are relatively well-educated and have your own opinions about things. I don't care about your past." Although the notion of the rural seems to matter less in contemporary gay online dating, we can infer that it is the rural queers with upward social mobility who are better integrated into the urban gay life; those who have not achieved this may remain excluded.

Zhiliang

Compared to *suzhi*, *zhiliang* is complex. Regarding how participants used this concept, it had both a narrow and a broad definition. *Zhiliang* in the narrow sense mainly refers to the quality of the appearance of one's face and body. Huli roughly explained that *zhiliang* is measured by everything related to one's appearance. Similarly, Shuai said: "*Zhiliang* is about whether one is well built, or whether he is [my] type." Accordingly, one can be described as "good-*zhiliang*" (优质) as long as he is good-looking; a "good-*zhiliang*" subject does not have to be well-educated or talented. For Shuai, the word *zhiliang* has the connotation of objectification, as it is often used to describe goods:

> For instance, I rarely hear people saying a book has good *zhiliang*. You don't use the word *zhiliang* to describe the content of the book. If you say a book has good *zhiliang*, I will think of the binding of the book [instead of its content]. So, when you use the Chinese word *zhiliang* to describe a person, the connotation [of objectification] is implicated.

Unlike Huli and Shuai, many participants adopted a broader definition of *zhiliang*. For them, *zhiliang* was reflected in not only appearance, but also aspects such as age, education level, personality, hobbies, social network, income, etc. It implied an overall evaluation of the subject. Xiaoduo likened gay men with good *zhiliang* to the "three-good student" (三好学生), a longstanding concept in China's education system that refers to the student who has good morals, good grades, and physical prowess (Lemos, 2012). By using this word, Xiaoduo referred to the totalizing force of the discourse of *zhiliang*. Indeed, many participants were practicing such an overarching standard of "quality" in online dating. Xing said: "When you are chatting on Blued, you are unconsciously screening. You are judging whether one's personality, his conditions, his look, height, the exterior, the interior, education degree, social status, and his self-cultivation match with yours or not."

On the one hand, *suzhi* and the narrowly defined *zhiliang* are mutually exclusive categories. For instance, Wangli mentioned that people with high *zhiliang* do not necessarily have high *suzhi*. On the other hand, the broadly defined *zhiliang* encompasses the aspect connoted by *suzhi*. Nevertheless, *zhiliang*, narrowly or broadly defined, has the objectifying connotation that *suzhi* does not have, since body is prominently involved. As Shuai suggested, it is *zhiliang*, not *suzhi*, that can be applied to commodities. This differentiation is even clearer in Taotao's account. He used "low-*suzhi*" to describe those who made him feel objectified when chatting on dating apps, which suggests that *suzhi* itself has no connotation of objectification. But when he mentioned the broadly defined *zhiliang* of app users, he called it "a very objectifying standard".

There is a folk concept that is related to both *zhiliang* and *suzhi*: the English word *low*, pronounced in the first tone of Mandarin as *lōu*. *Low* is often used in the situation where the aesthetic features of one's self-presentation—either verbal or visual, and digitally mediated in online dating—do not conform to the

mainstream taste held by the urban middle class. It also has a broader definition and is used to describe those who do not have high *suzhi* or *zhiliang*. I will return to this when discussing participants' perception of dating apps.

Desirable Desire

While both *suzhi* and *zhiliang* serve *desire sorting* in online dating, it is *suzhi* that seems to assume a bigger role in the *stratification of desires*. As Chapter 3 shows, urban Chinese gay singles prefer "relationalized sex" to the objectifying "no-strings-attached" sex. The "no-strings-attached" sex often takes the form of impersonal immediate hook-up and is solicited by sexually explicit conversations on dating apps, which are associated with low *suzhi*. Some researchers have likened the impersonal immediate hook-up via dating apps to "cruising" in the public space, which is a long-standing practice among MSM (see Licoppe et al., 2015). My participant Quan also drew links between the immediate hook-up facilitated by sex-oriented conversation and "cruising", albeit in negative terms:

> Those who directly ask you if you want to hook up or not make me feel [they are] so outdated. Nowadays, it is not like in the earlier years when you needed to hook up in the public toilet. I mean, you write down your number[15] somewhere in the toilet for hook-ups. Come on! It's already 2019! If you directly ask for hook-up, I will feel it's very *low*. […] And after all I have received university education. I will feel you're dumb and too *low*. I also feel it's unsafe.

Like Quan, most participants did not like this impersonal hook-up. In more desirable hook-ups, communication assumes an important role. Leshan said: "At least I should feel able to hold a conversation with him [the casual sexual partner]. If that's impossible and sex is just sex, I will find it hard to accept. […] I feel the need for at least some spiritual connection." Although a good conversation is not supposed to be centered on sex, it may not be totally sex-irrelevant either. Taotao said:

15 Quan did not say whether it was a phone number. According to my observations, it could also be the number of a communication software account (e.g., the QQ number).

> Chatting is important. I mean the so called *liaosao* (聊骚). *Liaosao* is kind of like flirting: you need to ignite the other's desire verbally. […] There might be exception when the body is attractive, but I think for most people who don't have perfect appearance, the ability of flirting and of arousing the other's desire is very important.

The difficulty of *liaosao* lies in the goal of arousing the other's desire verbally while not being sexually explicit. Once it gets sexually explicit, the objectifying connotation appears. To Taotao, this is related to one's *suzhi*:

> My requirement for *suzhi* is high. My Grindr profile says: "Impolite conversation objectifies both other and self." I think this has scared off many people, hahaha! […] If the guy can understand what I mean, I will think our values are similar. Then when we have further contact, either for sex or for friendship, I will find it more acceptable.

Overall, the desirable desire is the intimacy with those who are able or willing to have a conversation which has certain degree of intimacy but not equals sex talk. The sex-oriented talk is often seen as the sign of low *suzhi*, and thus the interlocutor might be perceived to have low quality. As we will see in the following section, the apps that tend to afford the desirable desire are perceived to have higher user quality; those where the impersonal immediate hook-ups prevail will be seen as *low*.

Blued and Aloha: Antithetical Apps

Blued and Aloha, two gay-targeted dating apps developed by Chinese companies, were the most popular dating apps among participants. They were frequently compared to each other in a manner suggesting that they were the antitheses of each other. Overall, the structures of desire presented to users by Blued and Aloha are different. First, Blued is more likely to afford immediate hook-ups facilitated by sex-oriented conversations, while Aloha tends to afford less sexual connection and is mainly used for socializing. Second, while the dominant sexual capital seems less clear on Blued to its users, Aloha prominently favors those who can present themselves in the way that conforms to the aesthetics of

metropolitan middle-class gay men. Overall, Blued was said to have lower user quality (either *suzhi* or *zhiliang*) and thus often described as *low*, while Aloha was said to have higher user quality. For instance, Dongchen said:

> Blued has *dragons and fish jumbled together* (鱼龙混杂), and the overall quality is getting worse. The quality I'm talking about refers to one's appearance, education, *suzhi*, etc. In general, the level of Blued is much lower than Aloha, as on the latter the chance to see high-level people is higher.

Dongchen attributed this quality difference to "the operation modes" of Blued and Aloha. He suggested that the design features played a role. Next, I show that design features indeed shape the structures of desire hosted by these two apps.

Design Features

Both Blued and Aloha have incorporated many functionalities that are possessed by mainstream media platforms, allowing users to post status updates, follow each other, react to content, and so on. However, the main interfaces of these two apps are distinct. The main interface of Blued shows a grid view or a list view—depending on the personal setting—and presents a range of nearby users' profiles in descending order of geographic proximity. One can start a conversation with any user displayed on the screen (Figure 1).

In contrast, the main interface of Aloha presents one single profile at a time. Users need to swipe left or right on the profile to signal their dis/interest in establishing a connection (Figure 2). Aloha also has an interface displaying the nearby users in a grid view, but this interface is only accessible when users buy the VIP service. Meanwhile, a user can change the default setting to hide the distance between him and another user. Unlike on Tinder, the latest version of Aloha affords private messaging without a match, but messages from unmatched users are in a sub-folder and only can be seen when one clicks into it.

Therefore, the matching mechanism of Aloha to some extent downplays the role of immediate proximity, which is central to immediate hook-ups. Participants were aware of how these differences shaped user behaviors. Kaikai said: "Blued is a location-based app. The biggest difference between Blued and Aloha is that

Figure 1. Screenshots of the interfaces of Blued. The left shows the main browsing interface. The right shows the social feeds in a user profile.

there is lots of randomness in who you see on Aloha, where the distance is not really a decisive factor. So Blued is very convenient for hook-ups." Similarly, Leshan said immediate hook-ups are more constrained on Aloha, since the users one has matched with are not always in the immediate proximity.

In addition, profiles on Blued indicate whether the user is online or not. Users can also use filters to exclude offline users. Although Aloha allows users to see when a user was last online, it does not show whether the user is online now or not. These differences in design features mean that Blued has a higher degree of *communicative synchronicity*, which contributes to the higher degree of *sexual availability* on Blued. As many participants said, communication on Aloha often takes a longer time.

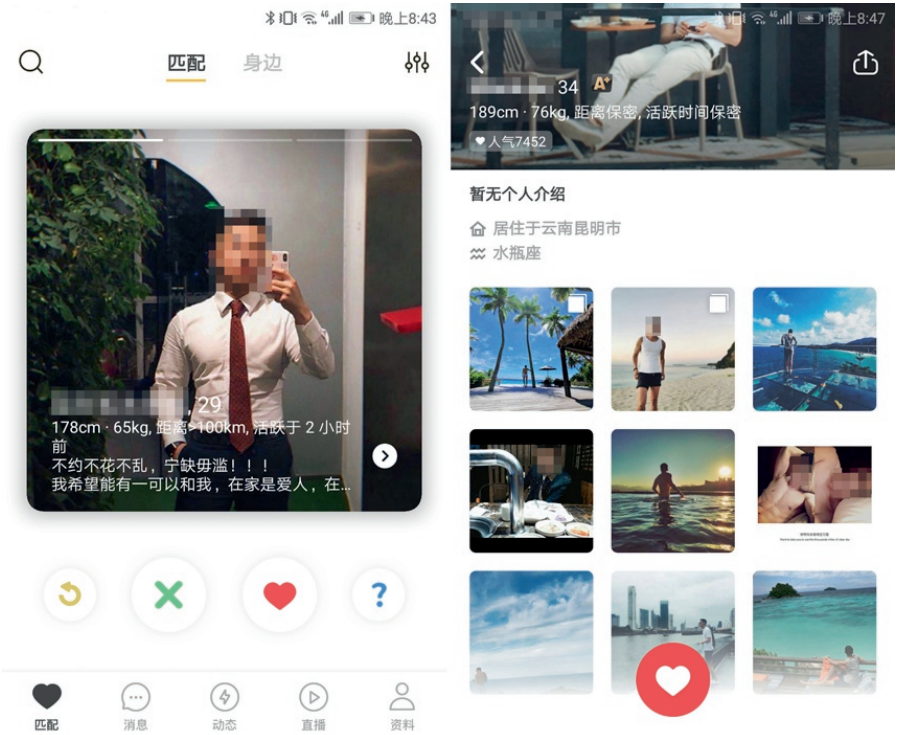


Figure 2. Screenshots of the interfaces of Aloha. The left shows the main browsing interface. The right shows a user's profile, which visually resembles an Instagram profile.

Nevertheless, design features are not the sole factor that makes hook-up easier on Blued than on Aloha. The larger user base of Blued also makes the chance bigger. It also means the diversity of users; urban middle-class gay men may see people of other social classes and thus conclude that Blued has a lower user quality. The market positioning of Blued has contributed significantly to its large user base.

User Base

Blued is the most successful gay dating app from China, as the amount of its daily active users had already reached three million in 2016 (Hernández, 2016), rivalling Grindr's global popularity (Avery, 2019). Participants often mentioned they could see various kinds of people on Blued, but in a negative tone. Some complained that there were too many "weirdos" on Blued whose behaviors were

unpredictable and unacceptable, such as cursing in a conversation and starting a verbal fight; some said there were too many elderly people. In comparison, the user group of Aloha seems to be more homogenous. Peng said: "People on Aloha seem to be more glamorous and nicely dressed, while on Blued you can really see people of *the three religions and the nine schools of thought* (三教九流, an expression with negative connotations)."

The large user base and user diversity of Blued partly result from its marketing strategies. Ankang used to be the product manager of Blued. He explained that the homogeneity of Aloha users stems from its seed users, who were basically young, good-looking urban middle-class users invited by the developers. According to him, Blued has a different market positioning. He said:

> We have considered diversity. […] Our positioning has been different from that of Aloha since the beginning. This position can thus attract users from third-tier or fourth-tier cities, or from lower social classes. […] Those gay men [of lower social classes], they are the majority. They are silent, but they want to find each other. They use Blued because they think at least some people will say hi to them there. If he uses Grindr—he may not even be able to download Grindr—if he uses Aloha, nobody will say hi.

The strategy of Blued is related to a term that has been popular in China's internet industry in the last few years: *xiachen shichang* (下沉市场). With a literal meaning of "a sunken market", it actually refers to the market of 3rd-tier, 4th-tier, or 5th-tier cities, small towns, and rural areas. Working in the internet industry, Zhu was familiar with marketing strategies of dating app companies. He attributed the "*low*-ness" of Blued to its strong presence in the "sunken market". He said:

> Blued has become the dating app that has the most registered users in the whole world. But the cost is that it has sunk to the provincial cities, or the cities that are not so fashionable. […] Aloha didn't "sink", so it is determined to have a smaller user base. But its fans would say, the *zhiliang* of friends making and live streaming on Aloha, is *OK*. Well, friends making on Blued is not so influenced [by its provincial users] in metropolises, because it is geographically constrained. […] But live streaming it different, since

> it is not geographically constrained. I believe metropolitan users—well this may have a sense of discrimination—may not watch live streaming anymore, although they may use to be the audience. But they may still watch the live streaming on Aloha, because it has a very different style and a different user group.

Indeed, since users from different regions can still "meet up" via live streaming, metropolitan users can still be exposed to the presence of users from provincial cities. Even if one is not necessarily from provincial city, signs that may link him to the provincial identity are seen as undesirable by some participants. For instance, Peng did not like watching live streaming. He said: "It's just embarrassing. Many live streamers can't even speak good Mandarin. I saw a very handsome live streamer, but when he spoke, his north-eastern accent really isn't my thing."

Self-Presentation

Although both Blued and Aloha afford posting statuses, participants noticed that Aloha users invest more in self-presentation than Blued users do. Some participants complained that many Blued users did not even upload face pictures to their profiles, although they might exchange photos through private messaging. By hiding their faces from the profiles, these users may want to protect their identities. As mentioned in Chapter 1, some gay users might be reluctant to reveal gay identities to others; some may worry about the sex-related stigma attached to a "hook-up app" like Blued. Meanwhile, as the most popular MSM-targeted app, Blued has attracted many users who live a double life or who do not even identify as gay. Wang (2019b) has noticed that there is a group of Blued users who are either in heterosexual marriages or over 40-years-old; their profile photos either display landscape pictures or are simply left blank. On the other hand, younger users who are still exploring their sexualities may want to hide their identities as well before they form a steadier identity. For this reason, Sang did not upload face pictures to his Blued profile.

Aloha has a different context. Given the swiping mechanism, one can hardly get a match if the profile has no face pictures. Accordingly, Aloha users mainly consist of urban middle-class gay men who are willing to reveal their gay identities and share about their lives online. Users who are using both Aloha and Blued may be

more active in self-presentation on the former than on the latter. For instance, Fei said: "Aloha is more like a platform for self-presentation. […] But people on Blued are quite weird. You don't want to show yourself to these people." In contrast, users like Sang may feel excluded on Aloha. Sang said: "Just like what people say, Aloha seems like a self-marketing platform to me. […] I don't like it, because I want more privacy."

Many participants described Aloha users as "glamorous" (光鲜亮丽) and claimed that Aloha is full of high-quality photos. Given the abundant user-generated content on Aloha, posting and/or viewing photos had become the main reason for some participants to use this app. Zheren said: "Sometimes I just look at how other people dress. And I also post some pictures of my own. Just like I said, I'm using it as Instagram. After all, the *zhiliang* of the photos on Aloha is quite good." Like Zheren, many participants likened Aloha to Instagram, an app that is blocked by China's Great Firewall. What my participants said about Aloha also resonates with what Duffy and Chan (2019, p. 131) has found to be the dominant culture on Instagram: a "culture of airbrushed perfection and aspirational lifestyle presentation". The design features of Aloha have contributed to this (figure 2), but it is also facilitated by the collective willingness of metropolitan middle-class gay men to disclose themselves online.

Besides the willingness of self-disclosure, media literacy also contributes to the exclusion of the less-educated MSM belonging to lower social classes. The ability to take and edit personal photos to evoke middle-class aesthetics matters more on Aloha. It not only mediates one's *zhiliang*, but also constitutes *zhiliang*.

Overall, Aloha users are believed to have higher quality by the group of people we study. Compared to Blued, it is situated in a better position in the sexual field of metropolitan middle-class gay men. As Dongchen said: "There is a popular saying in the [gay] circle: for a high-quality hook-up, use Aloha; for a rush hook-up, use Blued."

Grindr and Tinder: Bubbles of Cosmopolitanism

According to my participants, Grindr and Tinder have differences and similarities in terms of the structures of desire they host. Regarding the differences, Grindr affords more immediate hook-ups than Tinder does—or than Aloha does, as some participants compared Grindr to Aloha as well. Indeed, Grindr's browsing interface is similar to that of Blued, while Tinder entails a matching mechanism as Aloha does. In terms of the similarities, the dominant sexual capitals on Grindr and Tinder both have a touch of cosmopolitanism. According to participants, gay user groups of Grindr and Tinder prominently consisted of urban Chinese gay men with transnational experiences, expatriates or foreign students living in Chinese metropolises, and foreign travelers. In other words, Grindr and Tinder remain as bubbles of cosmopolitanism, where Chinese gay men from lower social classes have been excluded. Accordingly, structures of desire on Grindr and Tinder are in favor of those who have transnational horizons, if not transnational experiences. Accordingly, participants who were using Grindr and Tinder often described them in contrast to the *low* Blued. This situation results from the thwarted local integration of these two apps. These two apps were perceived by their frequent users to have higher user qualities, both *suzhi* and *zhiliang*.

Thwarted Local Integration

Foreign dating apps have seen a thwarted local integration in China. Before Grindr and Tinder became known among metropolitan middle-class gay men, participants had already witnessed the rise and fall of another foreign MSM-targeted app: Jack'd. According to my participants, this app prevailed among urban gay men from approximately 2011 to 2012, before the local app Blued—which was initially developed as a replica of Jack'd (Miao & Chan, 2020)—took off. Many participants remembered that the connection of Jack'd became very unstable after a certain point. In their narratives, Jack'd was apparently "walled" (被墙了), or blocked by the Great Firewall. Ever since then, Jack'd users need to use VPNs for a fast and stable connection. Thus, the amount of Jack'd users decreased dramatically; many of them flocked to the local alternatives such as Blued and Aloha. Those who remained on Jack'd tend to be technology-savvy urban middle-class users for whom using VPNs is part of their online routines.

Since the policy of internet censorship is opaque to the public (Mou et al., 2016), the narratives about Jack'd being blocked remain speculative based on people's common knowledge of the Great Firewall. Nevertheless, the curtailed "technology fluidity"—the smoothness of online experiences in this case (Mou et al., 2016)—does influence the adoption of foreign dating apps. This speculation appeared in participants' narratives about the apps like Grindr and Tinder, whose technology fluidities had not always been good. According to Shuai, a frequent Tinder user, VPNs became unnecessary for Tinder since around 2018. This may be because Tinder started to allow users to sign in with their phone numbers (see "Tinder without Facebook–Pros & cons of signing up with your phone number," 2018). In the past, one could only log in with a Facebook account; Tinder seemed to have been implicated because of Facebook's being blocked in China. Thus, users of Tinder are likely to have increased. The newly emerged users were mostly university students, said Shuai. This means that Tinder still remains in the circle of young urban users. On the other hand, I heard conflicting narratives about whether Grindr has ever been blocked or not, as the degrees of its technology fluidity experienced by the participants seemed to vary. However, many participants did say that VPNs are not necessary, but without VPNs the connection can be very slow.

In fact, even if Grindr and Tinder are not blocked by the Great Firewall, Chinese users still have limited access to them. Although Grindr and Tinder can be found in Apple's App Store in China, things are different regarding Android app stores. Major Chinese smartphone manufacturers have bundled their own app stores. I checked the app stores on the top four popular smartphones according to their market share in 2019: Huawei (38.5%), Oppo (17.8%), Vivo (17.0%), and Xiaomi (10.5%) (*China Smartphone Market Q4 2019 and Full Year 2019*, 2020). When I invited some users of these phones to search Grindr and Tinder in their app stores, these apps could not be found. I also searched in the Tencent App Store, which has a substantial user base (Ververis et al., 2019). I did not find Grindr or Tinder there either.

Therefore, the ability to access and use Grindr and Tinder seems to be the privilege of a small group of users. As I show next, participants were aware of that.

Imagining a Small Cosmopolitan Circle

Participants who were frequent users of Grindr often said that Grindr users have higher quality than users of other apps. Taotao said: "Grindr users are slightly better in every way, from appearance to speech." Grindr users are apparently more comfortable with their gay identities and thus more willing to upload their personal photos. Wangli said: "On Grindr, people are willing to display their own photos. Speaking of authenticity, Blued is the worst." Wangli said Grindr users have higher *suzhi* and attributed it to the limited local integration of Grindr: "Those who have heard of it and are able to download it often have some overseas backgrounds." Similarly, Ankang said Chinese gay men who use Grindr tend to have some "international horizons". Indeed, transnational experience may lead Chinese gay men to the apps that are popular in foreign countries. For instance, Chuan discovered Romeo, an MSM-targeted app, when he was on a business trip in Germany. He kept using it after he returned to Beijing. As a student, Guo started to use Grindr when he went on an exchange program in another country. "After I came back, I wanted to see if I could still experience some cultural diversity on this app." Therefore, he kept using Grindr alongside the Chinese app Aloha. It should be noted that Grindr is popular in Hong Kong, which is beyond the Great Firewall's reach. In order to establish local connections there, Xiaoduo started using Grindr after moving to Hong Kong to study.

On the other hand, Grindr and Tinder also attract Chinese users who want to date foreigners. As the only frequent user of Tinder, Shuai witnessed the increase of Chinese users on Tinder in the last two years. Meanwhile, he also experienced a decreasing interest in foreigners himself. However, he initially chose Tinder because he thought that was where he could find high-*suzhi* foreigners. He explained:

> I used to think foreigners may have higher *suzhi*, although now I think they are not so different. […] I mean, I thought the chance to have a good conversation would be bigger with foreigners than with Chinese; I might share similar values [with the foreigners]. For instance, the political stance.

This attraction to foreigners based on *suzhi*, however, seems to be overshadowed by other participants' narratives about bio-racial preferences in gay dating.

Luoma (21), an undergraduate student, downloaded Grindr when he was travelling abroad, but he stopped using it after coming back to China. Speaking about the Chinese users of Grindr, he said: "I don't like their mentality of using Grindr. […] You know, the mentality of bottoms." What he referred to was that some Chinese gay men who take a more submissive role in sex buy into the myth about foreigners' hypersexuality and thus have a racial preference for foreigners, which mainly refer to white men (Farrer, 2010). Similarly, Songjia talked about the racial preference which he believed to exist among Grindr users. He said:

> Most of them just think they [Westerners] are born with good bone structure, good physique, good looks, and they also have lots of money. So they [the Chinese] make themselves cheap [to date Westerners]. […] Meanwhile, some people use it as a way of getting green cards for Germany, America, or Europe. They regard it as a way of leaving China.

What turned Luoma and Songjia away from Grindr was the fear of being measured by the racial standard in a dating arena where (white) foreigners hold more currency than Chinese do. Another factor is the potential objectification imposed by foreign users. Luoma said: "I feel when I was using Grindr abroad, I can still have good communication with someone. But in China, he [the foreigner] may think Chinese people are easy, and he just wants to use you as a masturbation cup." Therefore, although some participants may think Grindr has higher quality users, others frame the platform in terms of problematic foreign exchanges.[16]

Conclusion

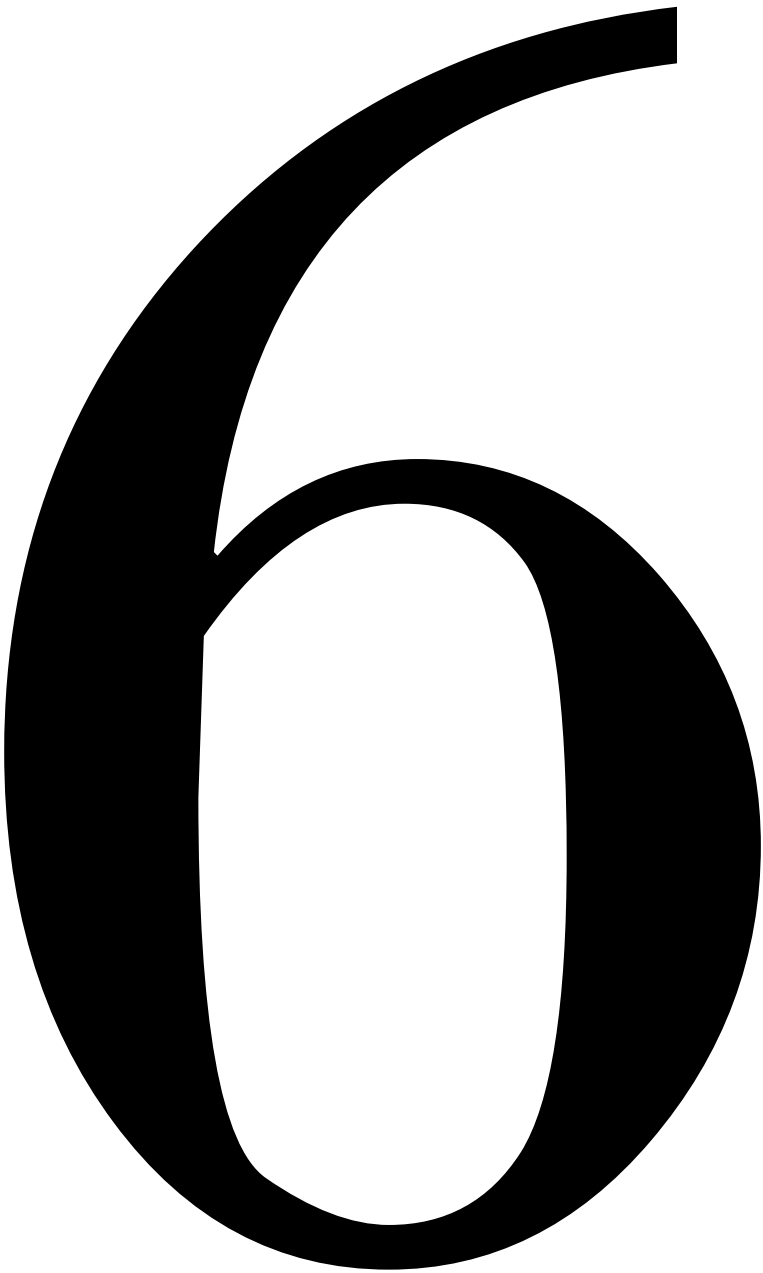
In this chapter, I examine the general patterns of desiring and being desired in metropolitan Chinese gay men's mobile dating practices in a polymedia environment (Madianou, 2014) where one can access an array of dating apps. I define *structures of desire* in the sexual field as not only the transpersonal valuations of desirability, but also the dominance of particular desires that

16 Interestingly, Jack'd is not seen as a cosmopolitan space, because Jack'd has a much smaller user base outside China than Grindr does. Besides, it gained many users in China in the early days. The users one can see on Jack'd are mostly Chinese.

coordinate actors' expectations and practices. Arguing that the structures of desire vary between apps, I reveal that factors like design features of dating apps, marketing strategies of app companies, and local internet regulations have shaped the structures of desire by unevenly distributing platform access to users across social classes and territorial divisions and (dis)enabling particular communicative practices in collective sexual life to different extents. Specifically, my findings suggest that the distance-sorted display of nearby users contributes to the predominance of immediate hook-ups on Blued and Grindr, while the matching mechanism of Aloha and Tinder functions as "speed bump" and thus nourishes users' expectations for lasting connections. As Blued is the most popular gay dating app on the heavily guarded Chinese internet market, its metropolitan middle-class gay users, who tend to be more forthright about their gay identity, almost experience a queer culture shock when encountering the users from lower social classes or lower-tier regions or those who are more silent about their attractions to men. In comparison, Aloha, Grindr, and Tinder, though with smaller user bases, are more specialized sexual sites where the hegemonic currency of sexual capital clearly takes the form of the middle-class standard for "quality": the broadly defined *zhiliang*, which encompasses *suzhi*. Notably, the adoption of *suzhi* discourse in gay men's articulation of desire shows that China's neoliberalization campaign has significantly shaped gay men's intimacies.

My findings suggest that the sexual field for young middle-class Chinese gay men in metropolises is quite isomorphic with the general social stratification. In online dating, they generally prefer those who have similar social statuses with theirs. This does not mean the sexual field's status structure revolves less around sexual capital than around economic or cultural capital, as Green (2014b) may suggest. Instead, it implies that the economic or cultural capital can significantly translate into sexual capital. This is reflected in the way the metropolitan middle-class gay men measure the desirability of a sexual subject: the broadly defined *zhiliang*, or the overall quality, covers much more than the appearance of the face and body. In online dating, for instance, even media literacy adds to sexual capital, as those who are able to craft a good profile with nicely written self-introduction and carefully edited photos, which convey a fine taste and signal the associated social status, are more likely to be perceived as desirable.

On the other hand, even for casual sex, people may consider factors beyond facial and bodily appearance. The stratification of desires among metropolitan gay men shows that *relationalized* sex, where communication assumes an important role, is more desirable than impersonal immediate hook-ups. Only by rearticulating sex as a communicative practice can we grasp the significance of the non-bodily components of sexual capital and further understand how communication technologies mediate collective sexual life.



Chapter 6

Conclusion

With this study, I aim to explicate the interplay between dating apps and Chinese gay men's intimate relationships, which I understand as part of the mediation process that implicates technological artefacts, user practices, and social arrangements (Lievrouw, 2014). I look at how dating apps are used in Chinese gay men's online social practices that themselves are enabled by dating apps. These practices are consolidated into gay men's intimate relationships, which in this process also see reformation.

Summary of Findings

Dating app use and the reformation of Chinese gay men's intimate relationships are examined in different dimensions from Chapter 2 through Chapter 5. Chapter 2 explicates what it means for a gay man to have a long-term, stable intimate relationship in a neoliberalized Chinese society. Chapter 3 shows how single gay men experience relationship development on dating apps, given the apps' particular affordances. *Relationalized* casual sex is contrasted with impersonal gay *cruising*, showing gay men's transformed perception of casual sex as manifest in dating app use. Chapter 4 accounts for non-single gay men's dating app use and its naturalization. A gay couple's negotiation of dating app use implicates the negotiation of relational boundaries, which may bring awareness and consideration of non-monogamy. Chapter 5 zooms out to the broader landscape of dating apps, revealing that the class division within the Chinese gay community seems to remain despite the reformative tendencies in gay relationships we observed in previous chapters.

Marks of Neoliberalization

Context matters. Chapter 2 puts this study in the context of a neoliberalized China. Findings in this chapter suggest that both the material and discursive conditions created by China's neoliberalization process significantly define why and how long-term, stable intimate relationships are important to Chinese gay men. Besides emotional satisfaction, intimate relationships also entail the promise of material support in the competitive Chinese society where people's socio-economic lives are full of risks. Almost paradoxically, the neoliberal tenets of self-dependence and autonomy, converging with the notions of romance and authentic feeling, determine that Chinese gay men are unlikely to lower

their standards for ideal partners and ideal relationships to enhance the chance of socio-economic solidarity. An ideal partner is supposed to be suitable in all respects, including appearance, age, education level, income, hobbies, and tastes. An ideal relationship should contribute to one's self-improvement in any aspect, be it emotion management or knowledge growth. For a neoliberal subject, there are two ways to interpret a bad relationship. On the one hand, it wastes the time that could have been spent on more "meaningful" things: reading books, going to the gym, or meeting interesting people. On the other hand, it can be meaningful, as long as one gets a lesson from it and thus becomes a better self.

Some researchers may draw the conclusion that there is push-back against the neoliberalization of intimacy, since material calculation is not what these gay men prioritize in online dating (e.g., Chan, 2019). This view, however, seems simplistic. Whether prioritizing material calculation equals neoliberalization of intimacy remains to be discussed. Putting this aside, even when people are pursuing spiritual connection and emotional satisfaction promised by intimate relationships, they may still bear the marks of neoliberalization. My study demonstrates that neoliberal values may shape people's perception of desirability, which can be seen in Chapter 3 and 5. Looking for *interesting people* and aspiring for self-improvement, urban middle-class gay men find themselves attracted to well-educated high-*suzhi* subjects who may help them with improvement in knowledge, professional skills, life qualities, etc. The *suzhi* discourse, which they invoke to stratify gay subjects' desirability, is at the very core of China's official "civilizing" project as part of the neoliberalization process. In a nutshell, neoliberalism has found a way to colonize the seemingly non-material aspect of intimate relationships.

Sex and Relationships

Dating apps have a reputation as "hook-up apps" (Albury & Byron, 2016; Davis et al., 2016; MacKee, 2016; Race, 2015a). Narratives about dating apps tend to highlight the facilitation of casual sex (Licoppe et al., 2015; MacKee, 2016) rather than "serious" relationships (Chan, 2018; Yeo & Fung, 2018). Underpinning this is the dichotomy between casual sex and relationship development, which is challenged by my findings presented in Chapter 3. Seeking a meaningful relationship is the motive that we should never underestimate when we try to understand Chinese gay singles' dating app use. Casual sex is prevalent among

dating app users for sure, but many gay men perceive it as a form of social connection with the potential to foster a meaningful relationship. They prefer this *relationalized* casual sex to impersonal "no-strings-attached" sex, as the latter offers no aspiration for relationship development.

Relationalized sex allows two gay strangers to actually converse and socialize with each other. Even if a relationship may not come out of that in the end, one may feel that something meaningful has been added to the project of self-reinvention (B.-C. Han, 2017). Through conversations with *interesting people*, one may feel he has broadened his horizons or gained interesting stories to tell and—in the words of a Dutch gay friend of mine—his life has been "enriched". Certainly, *relationalization* of casual sex is not confined to the digital sexual field anchored to dating apps. According to my participants, encounters of *relationalized* sex can also be facilitated by some mainstream social media platforms, such as Weibo and Douban. Meanwhile, there seems to be no reason for *relationalized* sexual encounters not to initiate in a physical venue, such as a gay bar. Nevertheless, dating apps enable *relationalized* sex to a much larger extent, as they provide more immediate access to a sexual site where a larger number of actors gather. For metropolitan gay singles, dating apps are almost constantly enacting the scene where the script of *relationalized* sex is activated and waiting to be performed.

Apart from the *relationalization* of casual sex for single gay men, dating apps also introduce the possibility of reformation into non-single gay men's intimate relationships, as discussed in Chapter 4. For non-single gay men and their partners, domestication of dating apps in and for their relationships is a process where they negotiate relational boundaries. The need for negotiation means that monogamous norms for a romantic relationship are no longer taken for granted. The abundant 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 had never been 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 from a free subject who voluntarily restricts his freedom for an intimate relationship that is seen as true love (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Persistent Class Divide

The above-mentioned reformation of gay relationships, however, does not seem to flatten the hierarchy within the gay community. As shown in Chapter 5, the desirability of user groups clustered around different dating apps and even desires themselves are stratified. To a large extent, stratification of desirability and desires is grafted onto the general social stratification. For metropolitan middle-class gay men, a high-quality subject should be nearly almighty: attractive appearance, good sex skills, high education level, decent income, appropriate speech, and refined tastes. He should be comfortable with being gay, willing to engage in a casual conversation that may or may not lead to casual sex or relationship development, and capable of presenting himself in his dating profile with certain aesthetics. Metropolitan middle-class gay men in China are aware that the chance to find an ideal match varies on different apps. Design features of dating apps, marketing strategies of app companies, and local internet regulations have unevenly distributed platform access to the users across social classes and territorial divisions and (dis)enable particular communicative practices in dating scenes to different extents. Metropolitan middle-class gay men are surely privileged, as they can switch between apps for their own cause. Gay men from lower social classes and/or provincial territories may have not even heard of the alternative dating apps beyond the Great Firewall. To conclude, dating apps surely play a part in the exclusion and distinction operating among Chinese gay men. The reformation of gay relationships has a limited scope, within which only metropolitan middle-class gay men seem to be the leading actors.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The scope of this study has its own limitations. Although I did not plan to focus on a specific social class, my participants were basically confined to the middle-class. This is largely due to the way I recruited participants. Since I used my personal social media accounts to post research advertisements, the latter

were forwarded by people from my own social network and thus unlikely to travel beyond the middle-class network I was located in. Besides, compared to non-heterosexual men from lower social classes, middle-class gay men are more likely to express their sexual orientations or self-identify as gay (Barrett & Pollack, 2005). They are less hesitant to disclose their gay identities to a researcher they have never met before and more willing to share they gay experiences. Considering the above, future research may look at the less visible groups, mainly non-heterosexual men from lower social classes in China, and account for their lived experience with dating apps.

Apart from social class, place of residence is another limitative factor that my readers should consider. As I chose to focus on self-identified gay men living in urban areas, rural non-heterosexual men were excluded from this study. Moreover, most of my participants were from the so-called "(new) 1st-tier cities" rather than lower-tier cities, from metropolises rather than smaller cities or townships. Therefore, what remains to be researched is how Chinese non-heterosexuals from rural areas or small/medium-sized cities use dating apps. After all, dating apps are location-based services. Their affordances are complicated by the size of user group in a certain area. Particularly, it would be interesting to examine how the perceived abundance/scarcity of potential sexual/romantic partners influences the patterns of dating app use and the formation of intimate relationships.

Theoretical contributions of this study suggest some new perspectives that can be further developed in future research. In Chapter 4, I propose a quadripartite framework of domestication by adding the *relational* dimension to a tripartite framework that contains the *practical*, the *symbolic*, and the *cognitive* dimensions (Sørensen et al., 2000; Sørensen, 2006). This is to underline the negotiation and interaction that take place among members of a social unit when they domesticate certain technologies together. Notably, 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.

Chapter 5 contributes to sexual field theory (Green 2008, 2014a, 2014b). Most of all, I have broadened the definition of *structures of desire*, which now refers to not only the transpersonal valuations of desirability, but also the dominance of particular desires that coordinate actors' expectations and practices. The explanatory power of this redefined concepts needs to be verified in future research. Meanwhile, I have also proposed two new concepts: *desire sorting* and *stratification of desires*. *Desire sorting* refers to the process in which one must decide not only how desirable another actor is, but also in what sense this desire is manifest. *Stratification of desires* is about the phenomenon that some forms of desires are considered more desirable than others in a particular sexual field. The two new concepts enrich sexual field theory such that it can be applied to studies of sexual sites with more diverse actors instead of highly specialized sites with a homogenous composition. Accordingly, future research could examine how different components of sexual capital may lead the desire sorting process to different directions. Researchers may also look at how stratifications of desires vary among different groups of people or in different subfields.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, I was sensitized by the differences and similarities between the Chinese and the Dutch gay communities. Consequently, I hold the view that some dating patterns, such as being open to various relational possibilities, are not a "Chinese thing" as some researchers may suggest. Meanwhile, characteristics of the Dutch gay dating scenes, such as the lack of an (overt) admiration for a high level of education, informed me how special it is that Chinese gay men value education so much when they look for a partner. Nevertheless, the comparison I made was not systematic, as this is not a comparative study after all. That said, researchers can make more rigorous and thorough comparisons in the future, so that we can better understand how gay men's everyday experience is shaped by the structural factors in the societies they reside in.

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Appendix

Basic information of the participants mentioned in the text

Name	Age	Profession/Field	City	Place of Origin
Ankang	25	internet industry	Beijing	Jiangxi province
Boshi	31	PhD student	Shanghai	Changsha, Hunan province
Chaiwei	24	lawyer	Guangzhou	Hunan province
Chenshi	20	costume designer	Beijing	Hengshui, Hebei province
Chong	25	postgraduate student	Beijing	Nanchang, Jiangxi province
Chuan	24	automobile industry	Beijing	Zibo, Shandong province
Dasheng	23	video website employee	Chengdu	Deyang, Sichuan province
Dian	20	undergraduate student	Beijing	Heilongjiang province
Dongchen	28	urban planning consultant	Shenzhen	Mianyang, Sichuan province
Fangyuan	31	creative brand practitioner	Beijing	Harbin, Heilongjiang province
Fei	30	advertising account manager	Beijing	Zhangjiakou, Hebei province
Gaoxing	26	human resource	Changsha	Changde, Hunan province
Guo	22	postgraduate student	Beijing	Xi'an, Shaanxi province
Helan	25	yoga teacher	Beijing	Liaoning province
Huli	25	management consultant	Shanghai	Shijiazhuang, Hebei province
Jiangshan	30	LGBTQ NGO worker	Guangzhou	Heilongjiang province
Jiawei	29	security consultant	Beijing	Tianjin
Jiemin	21	LGBTQ NGO worker	Shanghai	Anhui province
Kaikai	26	general manager assistant	Beijing	Tongchuan, Shaanxi province
Laijun	22	unemployed graduate	Beijing	Tianjin
Leshan	21	undergraduate student	Beijing	Chongqing
Liu	28	PR practitioner	Shanghai	Qiqihar, Heilongjiang province

Name	Age	Profession/Field	City	Place of Origin
Lixiang	25	postgraduate student	Beijing	Inner Mongolia autonomous region
Luogang	23	postgraduate student	Beijing	Hangzhou, Zhejiang province
Luoma	21	undergraduate student	Tianjin	Guangzhou, Guangdong province
Mingde	24	product manager	Beijing	Beijing
Peng	22	undergraduate student	Beijing	Tianjin
Quan	28	bank clerk	Beijing	Shanxi province
Rao	25	health care industry	Shanghai	Shandong province
Rui	30	freelance musician	Shanghai	Dalian, Liaoning province
Sang	23	postgraduate student	Beijing	Chengde, Hebei province
Sansan	30	lawyer	Beijing	Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region
Shenlie	21	undergraduate student	Yueyang	Shaoguan, Guangdong province
Shuai	27	management consultant	Beijing	Shenzhen, Guangdong province
Songjia	29	game developer	Hangzhou	Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region
Taotao	23	journalist	Beijing	Xiaogan, Hubei province
Wangli	28	internet industry	Beijing	Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region
Wenjie	25	PR practitioner	Guangzhou	Chengdu, Sichuan province
Xiaoduo	20	undergraduate student	Beijing	Weihai, Shandong province
Xiaohu	23	channel manager	Hangzhou	Hunan province
Xing	31	high school teacher	Beijing	Zhengzhou, Henan province
Xuesong	26	unemployed graduate	Beijing	Kaifeng, Henan province

Name	Age	Profession/Field	City	Place of Origin
Yangbin	40	international trade	Ningbo	Jingzhou, Hubei province
Yangyang	24	PhD student	Hong Kong	Jiangsu Province
Yun	29	doctor	Beijing	Shandong province
Yuyang	33	employee of a transnational company	Kunming	Ganzhou, Jiangxi province
Zheren	25	content operator	Beijing	Shenyang, Liaoning province
Zhu	27	mobile application development	Beijing	Qingdao, Shandong province

Summary

In China, mobile dating applications, or "dating apps", have gained millions of Chinese gay users. Although China's "Great Firewall", among other internet regulation measures, has limited users' access to foreign dating apps like Grindr and Tinder, these apps are still quite popular among metropolitan users who use a virtual private network (VPN) to climb the firewall. Meanwhile, local apps thrive in the safe haven heavily guarded by China's internet regulations. Blued, for instance, has more than 40 million registered users worldwide, approximately 70% of whom are from China (Cao, 2018). In China alone, Blued has more than 3 million daily active users (Hernández, 2016).

Dating apps have triggered many social debates about love and sex. Notwithstanding the various and often entangled motives users have (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Ward, 2017), dating apps are constantly referred to as "hook-up apps" by researchers, especially in gay dating app studies (Albury & Byron, 2016; Davis et al., 2016; MacKee, 2016; Race, 2015a). Affordances of dating apps seem to be manifest in the facilitation of casual sex (Licoppe et al., 2015; MacKee, 2016) rather than "serious" relationships (Chan, 2018; Yeo & Fung, 2018). Given the mixed motivations reported by users, combined with a tendency of researchers and the media to promote a casual sex script, dating app studies could benefit from a broader perspective on how and why people use dating apps. In this research, I intend to pay more attention to social relationships, defined as "connections that exist between people who have recurring interactions that are perceived by the participants to have personal meaning" (August & Rook, 2013, p. 1838). Taking the *mediation* perspective that emphasizes the mutual shaping of technology and society (Lievrouw, 2014), I aim to understand how dating apps mediate Chinese gay men's intimate relationships.

Specifically, I want to explore: (a) how single gay men develop social relationships through dating apps, which are believed by many people to facilitate impersonal casual sex instead of lasting social connections; (b) how dating app use can be negotiated by gay couples and become acceptable in their relationships; (c) how gay users experience and perceive the division among user groups clustered around different dating apps.

To understand how dating apps mediate Chinese gay men's intimate relationships, we need to understand what intimate relationships mean to Chinese gay men. In Chapter 2, I discuss how the significance of intimate relationships is determined by both the material and discursive conditions created by China's neoliberalization process. The material and discursive conditions seem to work against each other in the shaping of intimate relationships. On the one hand, the material needs and the following mental stress in the highly competitive Chinese society determine that a partnership with another person serves individuals' interests. With the partner's support, a gay man may find it easier to resist the risks and stress in socio-economic life. On the other hand, neoliberal campaigns such as the state-led "civilizing" project have created a discursive environment where autonomy and self-care have been set up as the norms. In line with that, neoliberal beliefs about the ideal relationships emphasize equality and financial independence. Since neoliberalism drives individuals to reinvent and improve themselves, an ideal relationship is also supposed to help one gain a sense of achievement in any aspect. One who has not found an ideal partner is more likely to justify singlehood than to compromise the criteria for a partner. Overall, neoliberalism seems to be the undertone of participants' narratives about their dating practices, relationship maintenance, and their understanding of desires and desirability, which are examined in Chapter 3, 4, and 5.

Chapter 3 explores how urban gay singles in China develop social relationships on dating apps. According to my findings, relationship development is often driven by casual conversations, which are not motivated by clear pragmatic purposes (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Casual conversations tend to unfold around common hobbies or experiences, serving as a source of sociability, or satisfaction in socializing itself (Simmel, 1949). In contrast to casual conversations, two forms of conversations are deemed highly instrumental and undesirable: one is the sex-oriented conversation aimed at immediate sexual encounters; the other is the interrogative conversation in which people ask private questions in a nonreciprocal and rigid way. Besides craving sociability, users "relationalize" casual sex by perceiving it as a form of social connection and endowing it with the potential to foster a relationship. This is also reflected in users' preference for sexual partners with whom they can hold a conversation. Users also exploit the affordances of different media platforms and capture the relationship potential by platform switching. They switch to the mainstream media platform

WeChat for more synchronous communication and to collect more identity cues from each other. Platform switching also signals willingness for relationship development and mutual trust. Nevertheless, users keep going back to dating apps for new possibilities for social relationships.

In Chapter 4, I draw on domestication theory (Berker et al., 2006) and look at how non-single Chinese gay men use dating apps, how gay couples negotiate the rules of dating app use and the boundaries of their relationships, and what symbolic meanings are associated with dating apps. Findings show that non-single gay users' various motives and uses generally construct a dual role of dating apps: a pool of sexual/romantic alternatives and a channel to the gay community. Although the former constitutes a threat to monogamy, the latter leaves room for the negotiation between the couple for acceptable but restricted uses. This negotiation is in tandem with the negotiation of relational boundaries, as the domestication of dating apps can result in either the reinforcement of monogamy or the embrace of non-monogamy. Regarding the symbolic meanings of dating apps, Chinese gay men tend to perceive dating apps to be as unremarkable as other social media platforms. This is achieved through a cognitive process where they learn to analyze the relationship experience of themselves or others and debunk the arbitrary association between dating apps and infidelity. Monogamous or not, they put faith in user agency and do not perceive dating apps as a real threat to romantic relationships.

Chapter 5 examines the enduring patterns of desiring and being desired in urban Chinese gay men's mobile dating practices in a polymedia environment where one can access an array of mobile dating apps. Drawing on sexual field theory (Green, 2014), I define structures of desire in the sexual field as the transpersonal valuations of desirability and the dominance of particular desires that coordinate actors' expectations and practices. My findings throw light upon the different structures of desire hosted by four dating apps: Aloha, Blued, Grindr, and Tinder. I argue that factors like design features of dating apps, marketing strategies of app companies, and internet regulations have shaped the structures of desire by unevenly distributing platform access to users across social classes and territorial divisions and (dis)enabling particular communicative practices in collective sexual life to different extents. Specifically, my findings suggest that the distance-sorted display of nearby users contributes to the predominance

of immediate hook-ups on Blued and Grindr, while the matching mechanism of Aloha and Tinder functions as "speed bump" and thus nourishes users' expectations for lasting connections. As Blued has gained the largest user base in the heavily guarded Chinese internet industry, its metropolitan middle-class gay users, who tend to be more forthright about their gay identity, almost experience a queer culture shock when encountering users from lower social classes or lower-tier regions or those who are more silent about their attractions to men. In comparison, Aloha, Grindr, and Tinder, though with smaller user bases, are more specialized sexual sites where the hegemonic currency of sexual capital clearly takes the form of the middle-class standard for "quality": the broadly defined *zhiliang*, which encompasses *suzhi*. Metropolitan middle-class gay men are surely privileged, as they can switch between apps for their own cause. Gay men from lower social classes and/or provincial territories may have not even heard of the alternative dating apps beyond the Great Firewall. In a nutshell, dating apps surely play a part in the exclusion and distinction operating among Chinese gay men. The reformation of gay relationships has a limited scope, within which only metropolitan middle-class gay men seem to be the leading actors.

Nederlandse samenvatting

In China hebben mobiele dating applicaties, oftewel 'dating-apps' miljoenen homoseksuele gebruikers. Hoewel China's 'Great Firewall', naast andere maatregelen die internettoegang reguleren, de toegang van gebruikers tot buitenlandse dating apps zoals Grindr en Tinder beperkt, zijn deze apps nog steeds behoorlijk populair onder grootstedelijke gebruikers die een virtueel privé netwerk (VPN) gebruiken om de firewall te omzeilen. Ondertussen gedijen lokale apps in de door China's internet regelgeving streng bewaakte veilige haven. Blued heeft bijvoorbeeld meer dan 40 miljoen geregistreerde gebruikers wereldwijd, van wie ongeveer 70% uit China komen (Cao, 2018). Alleen al in China heeft Blued dagelijks meer dan 3 miljoen actieve gebruikers (Hernández, 2016).

Dating-apps hebben veel sociale debatten over liefde en seks op gang gebracht. Ondanks de verschillende en vaak verstrengelde motieven van gebruikers (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017; Ward, 2017), worden dating-apps door onderzoekers voortdurend 'hook-up apps' genoemd, vooral in onderzoeken naar gay dating-apps (Albury & Byron, 2016 ; Davis et al., 2016; MacKee, 2016; Race, 2015a). De mogelijkheden van dating-apps zouden zich meer manifesteren in het faciliteren van vrijblijvende seks (Licoppe et al., 2015; MacKee, 2016) dan in 'serieuze' relaties (Chan, 2018; Yeo & Fung, 2018). Zowel onderzoekers als de media zijn geneigd dating-apps vooral te duiden als een vehikel voor vrijblijvende seks. Aangezien gebruikers aangeven gemengde motivaties te hebben, zouden onderzoeken naar dating-apps echter kunnen profiteren van een breder perspectief op hoe en waarom mensen dating-apps gebruiken. In dit onderzoek, probeer ik de aandacht te leggen op sociale relaties, gedefinieerd als "verbindingen die bestaan tussen mensen die terugkerende interacties hebben die door de deelnemers als persoonlijk betekenisvol worden ervaren" (August & Rook, 2013, p. 1838). Vanuit het bemiddelingsperspectief dat de 'mutual shaping', oftewel de wederzijdse vormgeving van technologie en samenleving benadrukt (Lievrouw, 2014), wil ik begrijpen hoe dating-apps bemiddelen in de intieme relaties van Chinese homomannen.

Deze dissertatie is specifiek gefocust op: (a) hoe alleenstaande homoseksuele mannen via dating-apps sociale relaties ontwikkelen; (b) op welke wijze homoseksuele stellen onderhandelen over het gebruik van dating-apps en hoe dit gebruik acceptabel kan worden binnen hun relaties; (c) hoe homoseksuele

gebruikers de verdeling van verschillende gebruikersgroepen rond verschillende dating-apps ervaren en waarnemen.

Om te begrijpen hoe dating-apps mediëren in de intieme relaties van Chinese homomannen, moeten we begrijpen wat intieme relaties voor hen betekenen. In hoofdstuk 2 bespreek ik hoe de betekenis van intieme relaties wordt bepaald door zowel de materiële als discursieve omstandigheden die zijn gecreëerd door het proces van neo-liberalisering in China. Deze materiële en discursieve omstandigheden lijken elkaar tegen te werken bij het vormen van intieme relaties. Enerzijds bepalen de materiële behoeften en de daaruit volgende mentale stress in de zeer competitieve Chinese samenleving dat een partnerschap met een andere persoon de belangen van individuen dient. Met de steun van een partner kan een homoseksuele man het gemakkelijker vinden om de sociaaleconomische risico's en stress in zijn leven te weerstaan. Anderzijds hebben neoliberale campagnes, zoals het door de staat geleide 'beschavingsproject', een discursieve omgeving gecreëerd waarin autonomie en zelfzorg de norm zijn. In het verlengde hiervan worden in neoliberale opvattingen over ideale relaties gelijkheid en financiële onafhankelijkheid benadrukt. Omdat het neoliberalisme mensen ertoe aanzet zichzelf opnieuw uit te vinden en te verbeteren, wordt een ideale relatie verondersteld iemand te helpen een gevoel van succes te verwerven op alle fronten. Het feit dat iemand die geen ideale partner heeft gevonden alleen blijft, past beter in dit denkraam dan dat hij de criteria voor een partner compromitteert. Over het algemeen lijkt neoliberalisme de ondertoon te zijn in de verhalen van de deelnemers over hun dating praktijken, het onderhouden van relaties en hun begrip van verlangens en wenselijkheid, die worden onderzocht in hoofdstuk 3, 4 en 5.

Hoofdstuk 3 onderzoekt hoe stedelijke homoseksuele singles in China sociale relaties ontwikkelen via dating-apps. Volgens mijn bevindingen wordt de ontwikkeling van relaties vaak gedreven door informele gesprekken, die niet gemotiveerd zijn door duidelijke pragmatische doeleinden (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Deze 'casual' gesprekken hebben de neiging zich te ontvouwen rond gedeelde hobby's of ervaringen, en dienen als een bron van gezelligheid, of het socialiseren zelf leidt tot voldoening (Simmel, 1949). In tegenstelling tot 'casual' gesprekken, worden twee vormen van conversatie als zeer instrumenteel en ongewenst beschouwd: de eerste is het op seks gerichte gesprek dat zich focust op

onmiddellijke seksuele ontmoetingen; de andere is het vragende gesprek waarin mensen op een niet-wederkerige en rigide manier privévragen stellen. Naast de hunkering naar gezelligheid, "relationaliseren" gebruikers vrijblijvende seks door het te zien als een vorm van sociale verbondenheid die de potentie heeft om uit te groeien tot een relatie. Dit komt ook tot uiting in de voorkeur van gebruikers voor seksuele partners waarmee ze een gesprek kunnen voeren. Gebruikers wenden de mogelijkheden van andere media-platforms ook aan, zo benutten ze het potentieel voor relaties door te wisselen tussen platforms. Ze schakelen over naar het reguliere media-platform WeChat voor meer synchrone communicatie en om meer identiteitskenmerken van elkaar te verzamelen. 'Platformswitching' duidt ook op bereidheid tot relatieontwikkeling en wederzijds vertrouwen. Toch blijven gebruikers teruggaan naar dating-apps voor nieuwe mogelijkheden voor sociale relaties.

In hoofdstuk 4 baseer ik me op de domesticatietheorie (Berker et al., 2006) en kijk ik naar hoe niet-alleenstaande Chinese homomannen datingapps gebruiken, hoe homoseksuele stellen onderhandelen over de regels voor het gebruik van dating-apps en de grenzen van hun relaties, en wat voor symbolische betekenissen worden geassocieerd met dating-apps. Mijn onderzoek laat zien dat de verschillende motieven en gebruiken van niet-alleenstaande homoseksuele gebruikers over het algemeen tot een dubbele rol voor dating-apps te herleiden zijn: het bieden van een pool van seksuele/romantische alternatieven en van een lijn naar de homoseksuele gemeenschap. Hoewel de eerste een bedreiging vormt voor de monogamie, creëert de tweede rol ruimte in een relatie voor onderhandelingen over aanvaardbaar maar beperkt gebruik. Deze onderhandeling gaat gepaard met het onderhandelen over grenzen binnen de relatie, aangezien de domesticatie van dating-apps zowel kan resulteren in de versterking van monogamie of de omarming van niet-monogamie. Wat betreft de symbolische betekenissen die ze geven aan dating-apps zijn Chinese homomannen geneigd om dating-apps net zo alledaags te vinden als andere sociale mediaplatforms. Dit komt voort uit een cognitief proces waarbij ze leren de relatie-ervaring van zichzelf of anderen te analyseren en de willekeurige associatie tussen dating-apps en ontrouw te ontkrachten. Monogaam of niet, ze stellen vertrouwen in de 'agency' van gebruikers en zien dating-apps niet als een reële bedreiging voor romantische relaties.

Hoofdstuk 5 onderzoekt de duurzame patronen van begeren en begeerd worden in de mobiele dating praktijken van stedelijke Chinese homomannen in een polymedia-omgeving waar men toegang heeft tot een scala aan mobiele dating-apps. Op basis van de seksuele veldentheorie (Green, 2014), definieer ik structuren van verlangen in het seksuele veld als de transpersoonlijke waarderingen van wenselijkheid en de dominantie van bepaalde verlangens die de verwachtingen en handelingen van actoren coördineren. Verschillende structuren van verlangen zoals deze zich manifesteren op vier dating apps: Aloha, Blued, Grindr en Tinder. Factoren zoals ontwerpkenmerken van dating-apps, marketingstrategieën van app-bedrijven en internet-regelgeving hebben specifieke structuren van verlangen gevormd door de platform-toegang ongelijk te verdelen over gebruikers uit verschillende sociale klassen en geografische regio's en het in verschillende mate (on)mogelijk maken van bepaalde communicatieve praktijken in het collectief seksuele leven. Meer in het bijzonder suggereren mijn bevindingen dat de op afstand gesorteerde weergave van gebruikers in de buurt bijdraagt aan het overwicht van onmiddellijke 'hook-ups' op Blued en Grindr, terwijl het matching-mechanisme van Aloha en Tinder functioneert als 'verkeersdrempel' en dus de verwachtingen van gebruikers voor blijvende verbindingen voedt. Omdat Blued het grootste gebruikersbestand heeft verworven in de zwaarbewaakte Chinese internetindustrie, ervaren homoseksuele gebruikers uit de middenklasse, die doorgaans meer openhartig zijn over hun homo-identiteit, bijna een queer-cultuurschok wanneer ze gebruikers uit lagere sociale klassen of uit ondergeschikte regio's ontmoeten of gebruikers die zwijgzamer zijn over hun aantrekkingskracht tot mannen. Ter vergelijking: Aloha, Grindr en Tinder zijn, hoewel met kleinere gebruikersbestanden, meer gespecialiseerde seksuele sites waar de overheersende valuta van seksueel kapitaal zich duidelijk schikt naar de middenklasse-standaard van 'kwaliteit': het breed gedefinieerde zhiliang, dat suzhi omvat. Homomannen uit de stedelijke middenklasse zijn zeker bevoorrecht, omdat ze al naargelang hun eigen doel kunnen schakelen tussen apps. Homomannen uit lagere sociale klassen en / of provinciale gebieden hebben misschien niet eens gehoord van de alternatieve dating-apps die buiten de 'Great Firewall' bestaan. Kortom, dating-apps spelen zeker een rol in processen van uitsluiting en onderscheid die zich manifesteren in de Chinese homogemeenschap. De hervorming van homorelaties heeft een beperkte reikwijdte, waarbij homomannen uit de grootstedelijke middenklasse de hoofdrolspelers lijken te zijn.

Portfolio

List of publications related to the PhD project

Wu, S. (in press). Domesticating dating apps: Non-single Chinese gay men's dating app use and negotiations of relational boundaries. *Media, Culture & Society*.

Wu, S., & Ward, J. (2019). Looking for "interesting people": Chinese gay men's exploration of relationship development on dating apps. *Mobile Media & Communication*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157919888558

Wu, S., & Ward, J. (2018). The mediation of gay men's lives: A review on gay dating app studies. *Sociology Compass*, *12*(2), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12560

Courses and training sessions attended during the PhD project

Academic

2019. Doing ethnography (2.5 ECTS)
2018. Analytic storytelling (2.5 ECTS)
2018. Digital research methods for textual data (2.5 ECTS)
2018. Philosophy of the social sciences and humanities (2.5 ECTS)
2018. The method of "con/text analysis" for interviews and other biographic data (2.5 ECTS)
2017. Advanced research methods 1: Qualitative Data Analysis (2.5 ECTS)
2017. Brush up your research design (2.5 ECTS)
2017. English academic writing for PhD candidates (2.5 ECTS)
2017. Introduction to coding with ATLAS.ti (1 ECTS)
2017. Shut up and write (2.5 ECTS)
2017. Your personal PhD work-life balance: How to do less, but achieve more. (1 ECTS)
2016. Doing the literature review (2.5 ECTS)
2016. How to survive your PhD (2.5 ECTS)
2016. Making your research proposal work for you (2.5 ECTS)
2016. Professionalism and integrity in research (1 ECTS)

Didactic
2020. Group dynamics
2019. Basic didactics

Workshops attended during the PhD project

2017. Digital Society Research Methods Workshop: Interpreting Social Activities Online. Kozminski University, Warsaw, Poland, September 10-11.

Courses taught during the PhD project

2019. Communication Technologies and Their Impacts, BA-level

Conference presentations related to the PhD project

2020. *Constructing structures of desire: Chinese gay men's dating app use in a polymedia environment.* Paper presented at the annual conference of The International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), converted from Finland to virtual due to COVID-19, July 12-17.
2020. *Domesticating dating apps: Gay men's negotiations of dating app use in romantic relationships*. Paper presented at the 70th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association (ICA), converted from Australia to virtual due to COVID-19, May 20-27.
2019. *"I'm just looking around": Appropriation of dating Apps by non-single Chinese gay men*. Paper presented at the 3rd Annual Interdisciplinary Conference of the Center for Critical Media Literacy at Technological University Dublin, Ireland, October 19.
2019. *Domesticating dating apps: Non-single Chinese gay men's dating app use and its implications for romantic relationships*. Paper presented at the NordMedia 2019 PhD Student Pre-conference, Malmö, Sweden, September 19-20.

2019. *Domesticating dating apps: Non-single Chinese gay men's dating app use and its implications for romantic relationships*. Paper presented at the IAMCR 2019 Pre-conference themed "Communicating China with the World: New Dynamics in International Communication", Madrid, Spain, July 6.
2018. *Looking for "interesting people": Chinese gay men's relational dynamics on mobile dating apps*. Paper presented at Intimacies Online, Online Intimacies, Roskilde University, Denmark, May 31 – June 1.
2018. *Sociability in Online Dating: Understanding Chinese Gay Men's Dating App Use*. Paper presented at the 16th Chinese Internet Research Conference, Leiden, the Netherlands, May 22-23.

Invited lectures

2018. Speaker. Invited lecture for International Men's Day on Dating Apps, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 19.

Media appearances

2019. EA. Magazine (Erasmus Alumni). "Tinder maakt van daten een spelletje" by Eva Hoeke. https://issuu.com/erasmusuniversiteitrotterdam/docs/ea_magazine_najaar_2019

Conference co-organization

2020. Surveillance Studies Network Conference 2020, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, postponed to 2021 due to COVID-19.

In China, dating apps have gained millions of gay users. This dissertation explores the role dating apps play in Chinese gay men's intimate relationships. Findings show that relationship development experienced by metropolitan gay singles is often driven by casual conversations, which tend to unfold around common hobbies or personal experiences. In the meantime, users "relationalize" casual sex by perceiving it as a form of social connection and endowing it with the potential to foster a relationship. Regarding non-single gay users, their 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. Although the former constitutes a threat to monogamy, the latter leaves room for the negotiation between a gay couple for acceptable but restricted dating app use. In the bigger picture, factors like design features of dating apps, marketing strategies of app companies, and China's internet regulations add to the division among gay user groups. These factors unevenly distribute platform access to users across social classes and territorial divisions, enabling particular communicative practices in dating scenes to different extents.