Article

Constructing Sexual Fields: Chinese Gay Men's Dating Practices Among Pluralized Dating Apps

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Abstract

In this study, we draw on sexual field theory to examine the structural nature of metropolitan Chinese gay men's mobile dating practices in a polymedia environment where one can access an array of dating apps. We define *structures of desire* in the sexual field as not only the transpersonal valuations of desirability but also the dominance of particular desires that coordinate actors' expectations and practices. Based on interviews with 52 urban Chinese gay men, we discuss the differing structures of desire hosted by four dating apps: Aloha, Blued, Grindr, and Tinder. Our analysis indicates that factors such as design features of dating apps, marketing strategies of app companies, and internet regulations have shaped the structures of desire by unevenly distributing the platform access to users across social classes and territorial divisions and (dis)enabling particular communicative practices in collective sexual life to different extents. 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 a "speed bump" and nourishes users' expectations for lasting connections. As Blued is the most popular gay dating app on the heavily guarded Chinese internet market, the diversity of its users drives away many metropolitan middle-class gay men who only desire their own kind. In comparison, Aloha, Grindr, and Tinder, with smaller user bases, are more specialized sexual sites where the dominant currency of sexual capital reflects the form of the middle-class standard for "quality."

Keywords

dating apps, desirability, gay men, online dating, sexual field

Introduction

Mobile dating applications, or "dating apps," play a significant role in gay men's dating lives (Wu & Ward, 2018). There are abundant dating apps for gay men, such as Blued, Grindr, Hornet, Jack'd, Scruff, and Tinder (Chan, 2016; Licoppe et al., 2016; MacKee, 2016; Phua, 2020; Roth, 2014; Wang, 2020b). In such a polymedia environment (Madianou, 2014) where one can access an array of dating apps, how gay men differentiate these apps and choose certain ones for their dating practices remains to be fully discussed. Previous studies have shown signs of differentiation. On 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 Scruff is targeted at the "bear" group (Roth, 2014). They can also overlap with national borders, as seen in how the Chinese app Blued thrives in China's heavily protected internet industry (Wu & Ward, 2020). The former case demonstrates the steering role of

marketing strategies and the latter illustrates the dividing force of local governmental regulations.

On the other hand, the ways gay men use these apps seem to differ. As revealed in MacKee's (2016) study, gay men in London tend to use Tinder 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 invited users to link their profiles to Instagram accounts. This constituted an

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identity verification mechanism that discouraged users to either present themselves or behave in a hypersexualized manner (MacKee, 2016). 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 a higher degree of anonymity, making users feel more comfortable presenting themselves sexually (MacKee, 2016); its distance-sorted design provides convenience for immediate hook-ups (Licoppe et al., 2016). Thus, design features of dating apps significantly influence gay users' dating practices.

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 show some enduring patterns of gay men's desiring and being desired. By shaping the landscape of dating apps, factors such as marketing strategies of app companies, local governmental regulations, and design features of dating apps—which themselves are influenced 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 condition gay men's collective sexual life.

This study explores the abovementioned shaping process. Drawing on sexual field theory (Green, 2008; Martin & George, 2006), we frame dating apps as "sites of the sexual field" and the abovementioned structures as "structures of desire." Specifically, we focus on China, which has witnessed both the dominance of local dating apps and the resilience of foreign apps (Wu & Ward, 2020). 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 determined 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, our research question is, "How are the structures of desire in Chinese gay men's practices with dating apps shaped by technological, commercial, and regulatory forces?" Given the limited data, we focus on middle-class gay men living in metropolises. In the next two sections, we 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 (cultural fields, political fields, etc.). Actors in the sexual field congregate for social and sexual connections with others, from sex on premises to marriage (Green, 2014a). As Green (2008) argues, the sexual field materializes in physical and virtual sites that commonly include bars, nightclubs, and internet chat rooms. Accordingly, dating apps are virtual sites of the sexual field.

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

> 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. (p. 27)

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) defines as "site-specific, transpersonal valuations of attractiveness that coordinate desirability" (p. 14). Produced by the overlapping erotic habitus of field actors, a structure of desire establishes a particular dominant 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, we further articulate that there exist various 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 fulfillment in both bodily and affective interest. Therefore, field actors need to sort out their desires

for others. In this process, which we call *desire sorting*, one must decide not only *how desirable* another actor is, but also desirable *in what sense*. As far as we 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).

To strengthen sexual field theory, we call for more attention to the possible forms of desire on a specific sexual site. We 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, in "cruising" places for men who have sex with men (MSM), bodily interest seems to prevail over romantic interest (Frankis & Flowers, 2009). In contrast, in a less specialized scenario, such as an ordinary bar or a party (see Kuperberg & Padgett, 2015), the possibilities of both casual sex and "serious dating" may 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 one hand, communication technologies bring awareness 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 among 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 host different structures of desire for 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, we also expect that there is a *stratification of desires*, with some forms of desire being more desirable and others being less. This is informed by a Beijing-based study on gay men's dating app use, conducted by Wu and Ward (2020). The urban gay single participants of this study were open to both sexual and "serious" relations. Even for casual sex, they preferred "relationalized casual sex," which is perceived as a form of social connection and endowed the potential to foster a relationship, to the no-strings-attached casual sex (Wu & Ward, 2020). How the stratification of desires interplays with the structures of desire remains to be studied.

Considering the above, we aim to examine the structures of desire hosted by different dating apps, as perceived by metropolitan middle-class Chinese gay users. We expect that 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 we examine the structures of desire on dating apps, we also pay attention to the stratification of desires.

Method

This study is based on semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 52 urban Chinese gay men. The first author, a native of China, conducted the interviews by online voice call via WeChat between October 2017 and March 2019. His gay identity and familiarity with the gay dating scenes in China were helpful in establishing a rapport with participants. Questions were about participants' choices of one or more dating apps, usage motives and behaviors, and perceived differences among dating apps in technological features and user groups. Interviews ranged from 28 to 110 min in duration, with the average length being 62 min. The first author transcribed them verbatim. To recruit participants, the first author posted an advertisement on two Chinese social media platforms, WeChat and Douban. Participants contacted him through WeChat or email. They were living in metropolises, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. All but one identified as gay, with this participant still exploring his sexuality. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants in this article.

Since dating apps are location-based services, participants were aware that their experience was related to their geolocation. 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 population size, income level, business opportunities, consumer behavior, and so on ("Chinese City

Table 1. Apps Reported by the Participants.

Origin	Queer-targeted	Mainstream
Developed in China	Aloha, Blued, Fanpanzi (翻牌子), Zank	Tantan (探探)
Developed in other countries	Grindr, GROWLr, Hornet, Jack'd, ROMEO	Coffee Meets Bagel, Tinder

Tier System," 2019). Forty-seven participants were living in the so-called "Tier 1" cities, as well as the "new Tier 1" which may still be perceived as Tier 2 by some people, including Beijing (31), Shanghai (6), Guangzhou (3), Chengdu (2), Shenzhen (1), Changsha (1), Tianjin (1), Hangzhou (1), and 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) in which they currently resided; others had left their hometowns for study or job opportunities. All but a few participants either had occupations that would be perceived as the middle-class occupations in the Chinese context[1] (public relations [PR] practitioner, product manager, business consultant, doctor, 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 may not apply 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 34 ($M = 25.1$) years. Our data show 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 our participants represent.

Regarding dating app use, half of the participants were using at least two dating apps at the same time. Among the other half, 24 participants had tried at least two dating apps; the other two participants had only used one app. Therefore, all but two participants compared the apps they had ever used during the interviews. Participants reported an array of dating apps, including the local, the foreign, the queer-targeted, and the mainstream (Table 1). As it is impossible to profoundly discuss every app that has been mentioned, we focus on the ones that stand out in our data. The most frequently mentioned apps were two MSM-targeted apps developed by Chinese companies: Blued and Aloha.[2] The most frequently mentioned foreign apps were Grindr, Jack'd, and Tinder. However, being frequently mentioned does not guarantee being fully discussed: We do not see a clear theme in participants' narratives about Jack'd. Therefore, our findings presented in this article are mainly about Aloha, Blued, Grindr, and Tinder.

It should be noted that Blued and Aloha also have the functionality of live streaming, which is not geographically bound. A popular live streamer may have more than 10,000 viewers across China (Wang, 2020a). However, none of our participants were regular viewers of live streaming; some had watched a few times and found it boring. Since our participants were mostly middle-class residents of Tier 1 cities, we infer that live streaming viewers mainly live in lower tier cities or belong to lower social classes and thus are out of our scope.

We conducted a *reflexive thematic analysis* of the data, regarding researcher subjectivity as a *source* for—not a disturbance to—knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The first author undertook data coding in an open, organic manner, using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. The second author, a straight male from Canada, supervised the coding process and examined the first author's interpretation of data from an "outsider" perspective. The coding process took three steps. To begin with, the first author closely read the transcripts and established preliminary codes. Then, he explored the relations among these codes and grouped interrelated codes into larger categories. Finally, the two authors agreed that three themes could be generated with these categories, namely, (a) *suzhi* (素质) and *zhiliang* (质量) as sexual capital; (b) Blued and Aloha as antithetical apps; and (c) Grindr and Tinder as cosmopolitan circles. In the "Findings" section, we 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, we reveal how Blued and Aloha, two local dating apps that are frequently compared with each other, host different structures of desire. Finally, we look at how Grindr and Tinder, two foreign apps that have experienced thwarted local integration, are constructed as small cosmopolitan sites of a subfield for gay men with transnational horizons or experiences.

Findings

Stratifying User Qualities: 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 our interviews, two folk 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. *Suzhi* is 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, p. 524), relating other concepts like "civilization" and "modernity." Embedded in 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 (MB)" (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. Our 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 participants placed on civility when they talked about *suzhi*, in line with how *suzhi* is discussed in the broader public realm. Shuai (29 years old), a business consultant, even referenced a case that was not directly related to 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 connoted by *suzhi* is often reflected in how people communicate and interact. Luogang (23), a postgraduate student, 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 (25), a journalist, 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 would not send or ask for nudes when starting a conversation.

Although no participants objected to hook-ups, sexually explicit conversations were often seen as a sign of low *suzhi*. 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.

Given that the sexually explicit conversations tend to happen in impersonal immediate hook-ups (Licoppe et al., 2016; Wu & Ward, 2020), users who explicitly seek impersonal immediate sex might be perceived to have low *suzhi*.

As said earlier, there is also discontinuity regarding the use of *suzhi*. Notably, the urban/rural division mentioned in previous studies was absent in participants' accounts. When we 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 even think that MB have much *suzhi* . . . If they are impolite, they will make clients unhappy. That will be their own loss." Indeed, unpleasant online conversations associated with low *suzhi* are not necessarily initiated by users with rural backgrounds. Moreover, most participants 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 may infer that it is the rural queers with upward social mobility that can be better integrated into the urban gay life; those who have not achieved this may remain excluded.

Zhiliang. Compared with *suzhi*, *zhiliang* is complex. Given 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 (25), a management consultant, 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 say a book has good *zhiliang*. If you say a book has good *zhiliang*, I will think of the binding of the book [instead of its content]. You don't use this word to describe the content of a book. 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, and income. It implied an overall evaluation of a subject. Xiaoduo (22), a postgraduate student, likened gay men with good *zhiliang* to the "three-good student" (三好学生) in China's

education system, 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 (31), a high school teacher, 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 one hand, *suzhi* and the narrowly defined *zhiliang* are mutually exclusive categories. For instance, Wangli (30), working for an internet company, 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 the body is prominently involved. As Shuai suggested, it is *zhiliang*, not *suzhi*, that can apply 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 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 refined taste held by the metropolitan middle class. It also has a broader definition and is used to describe those who do not have high *suzhi* or *zhiliang*. We return to this concept when discussing participants' perceptions 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 mentioned earlier, Wu and Ward's (2020) study shows that metropolitan 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 conversation 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., 2016). Our participant Quan (28), a bank clerk, 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's not like in the earlier years when you needed to hook up in the public toilet. I

mean, you wrote down your number[3] somewhere in the toilet for hook-ups. Come on! Times have changed! If you directly ask for a hook-up, I will feel it's very *low* . . . And after all, I received a university education. I will feel you're dumb and too *low*. I also feel it's unsafe.[4]

Like Quan, most participants did not like impersonal hook-ups. In more desirable hook-ups, communication assumes an important role. Leshan (21), an undergraduate student, 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. Shuai said,

> 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 an exception when the body is attractive, but I think for most people who don't have perfect appearance, the ability to flirt and arouse the other's desire is very important.

The difficulty of *liaosao* lies in the goal of arousing the other's desire verbally without being sexually explicit or bold. Once it gets explicit or bold, the objectifying connotation appears. For Taotao, this is related to one's *suzhi*:

> My requirement for *suzhi* is high. My Grindr profile says: "Impolite conversations objectify both others and yourself." . . . If someone can understand what I mean, I will think our values are at the same level. Then when we have further contact, either for sex or for friendship, I will find it more acceptable.

The desirable desire is oriented toward those who are able or willing to have a conversation that has a certain degree of intimacy but not merely sex talk. The sex-orient 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 MSM-targeted dating apps developed by Chinese companies, were the most popular dating apps among participants. They were frequently compared with each other in a manner suggesting that they were antithetical to each other. The structures of desire hosted by Blued and Aloha differ. First, Blued is more likely to afford immediate hook-ups, while Aloha tends to afford less
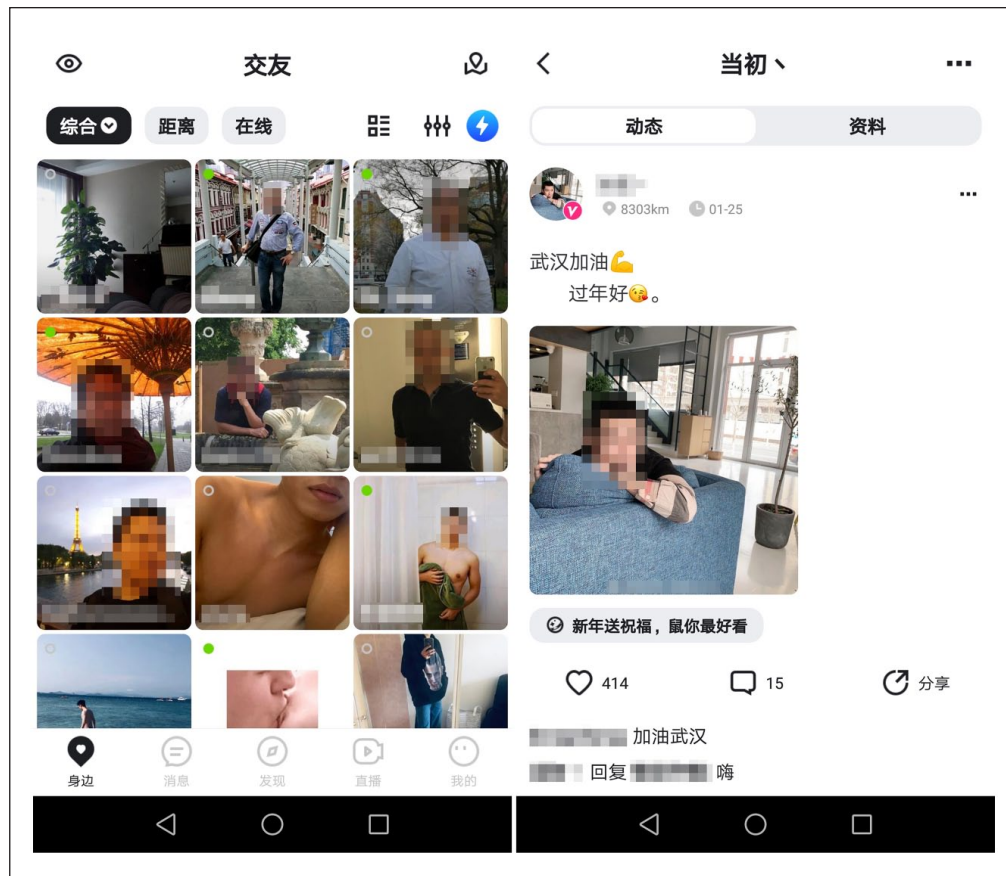
Figure 1. Screenshots of the interfaces of Blued. The left shows the main browsing interface. The right shows the social feeds in a user profile.

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 a 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 (28), a consultant for urban planning, said,

> Blued has *dragons and fishes 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, we consider how design features 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 them 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 subfolder and only can be seen when the users select that file.

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 (26), a general manager assistant, said,
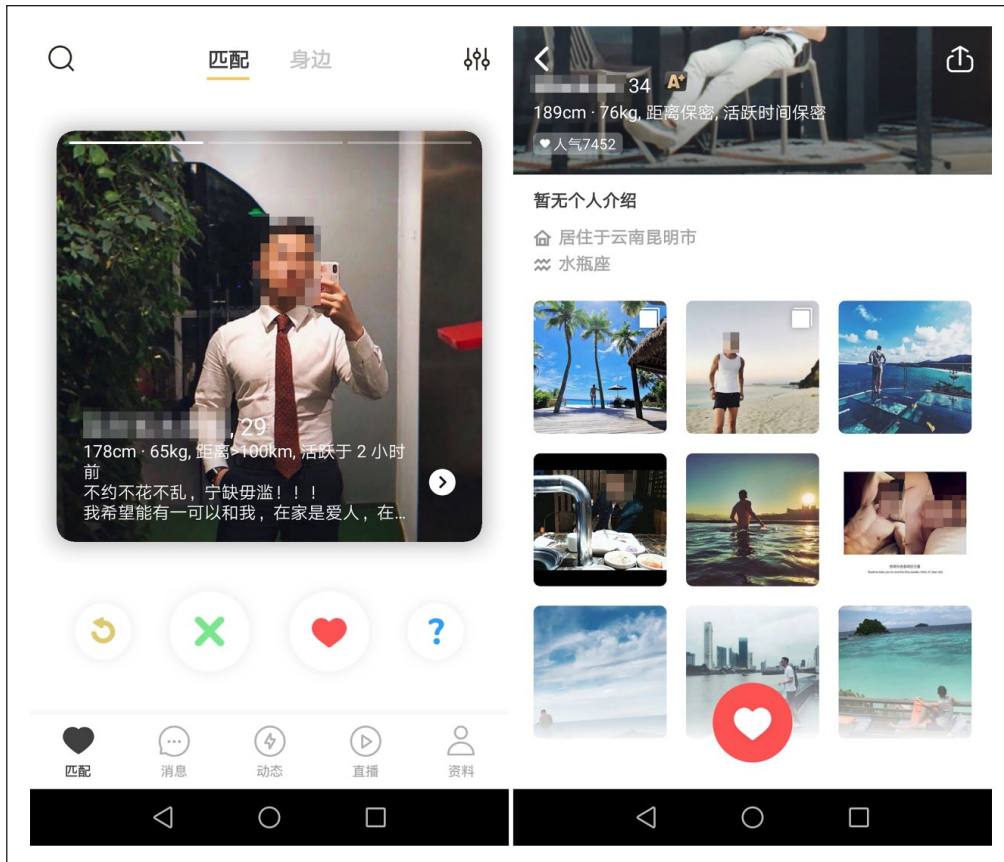
Figure 2. Screenshots of the interfaces of Aloha. The left shows the main browsing interface. The right shows a user's profile, which visually resembles an Instagram profile.

Blued is a location-based app. The biggest difference between Blued and Aloha is that 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 that Aloha constrains immediate hook-ups, since the users one has matched with are not always in immediate proximity.

In addition, Blued shows whether a user is online or not. One 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 currently online. These differences in design features mean that Blued affords a higher degree of *communicative synchronicity*, which contributes to the higher degree of *sexual availability* on Blued (Wu & Ward, 2020). As many participants said, communication on Aloha often takes a longer time.

Nevertheless, design features are not the sole factor that makes hook-ups 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 lower social classes and thus conclude that Blued has a lower user quality. The market positioning of Blued has contributed significantly to its sizable 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), rivaling Grindr's global popularity (Avery, 2019). Participants often mentioned that 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 homogeneous. Peng (22), an undergraduate student, 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 (25) 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 company. 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 recent years: *xiachen shichang* (下沉市场). With the literal meaning of "the sunken market," it actually refers to the market of third-tier, fourth-tier, or fifth-tier cities, small towns, and rural areas. Working in the internet industry, Zhu (27) was familiar with the 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 gay 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's determined to have a smaller user base. But its fans would say the *zhiliang* of friend making and live streaming on Aloha is OK. Well, friend making on Blued in metropolises is not so influenced [by provincial users], because it is geographically bounded . . . But live streaming is different, since it's not geographically bounded. 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, 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 with or without traveling. Even if one is not necessarily from a provincial city, signs that may link him to a provincial identity are seen as undesirable by some participants. For instance, Peng did not like watching live streaming:

It's somehow awkward. Many live streamers can't even speak good Mandarin. Some are very handsome, but they suddenly start to talk—I don't have a problem with Northeasterners—but they talk with a heavy north-eastern accent. Alas, it's not good [laughing].

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. By hiding their faces from the profiles, these users may want to protect their identities. As Wu and Ward (2018) conclude, 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 (2020b) has noticed that there is a group of Blued users who are either in heterosexual marriages or above 40 years old; their profile pictures are either landscape pictures or simply left blank. On the contrary, younger users who are still exploring their sexuality may want to remain hidden as well before they form a steadier identity. For this reason, Sang (23), a postgraduate student, did not upload face pictures to his Blued profile.

Aloha presents a different scenario. 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 (30), an advertising account manager, 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 (25), a content operator, 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 our participants said about Aloha also resonates with what Duffy and Chan (2019) have found to be the dominant culture on Instagram: a "culture of airbrushed perfection and aspirational lifestyle presentation" (p. 131). 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 that reflect 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 with 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-*zhiliang* hook-up, use Aloha; for a rush hook-up, use Blued."

Grindr and Tinder: Bubbles of Cosmopolitanism

According to our 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—or even Aloha, as some participants compared Grindr with 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 both Grindr and Tinder have a touch of cosmopolitanism. According to our 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 this perception, 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 at least transnational horizons, if not transnational experiences. Accordingly, participants who were using Grindr and Tinder often described the two apps in contrast to the *low* Blued. We argue that this arrangement 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 struggled with 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 our participants, this app prevailed among urban gay men from approximately 2011 to 2012, before the local app Blued took off. Many participants remembered that access to Jack'd became unreliable 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; many 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 routine.

Since the policy of internet censorship is opaque to the public (Mou et al., 2016), the narratives about Jack'd being blocked are speculative and 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. In participants' narratives, Grindr's and Tinder's technology fluidities had not always been good. According to Shuai, a frequent Tinder user, VPNs only became unnecessary for Tinder 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 being blocked in China. Thus, Tinder users are likely to have increased. The newly emerged users were mostly university students, said Shuai. If this is true, then Tinder still remains in the circle of young urban users. As for Grindr, we heard conflicting narratives about whether it 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, the situation differs for Android app stores. Major Chinese smartphone manufacturers have bundled their own app stores with their phones. We were unable to find Grindr or Tinder on the app stores for the most 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 we invited some users of these phones to search Grindr and Tinder in their app stores, these apps also could not be found. We also searched in the Tencent App Store, which has a substantial user base (Ververis et al., 2019). We 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 we 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 (24), working for a foreign automobile company, discovered ROMEO, an MSM-targeted app, when he was on a business trip in Germany. He kept using it after he returned to Beijing. Guo (22), a postgraduate student, 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. After moving to Hong Kong to study, Xiaoduo started using Grindr to establish local connections.

While Chinese gay men with transnational experience attract their metropolitan gay compatriots to Grindr and Tinder, these two apps also attract Chinese users who want to date foreigners. Shuai witnessed the increase of Chinese users on Tinder in the last 2 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 foreigners], for instance regarding the political stance.

This attraction to foreigners based on *suzhi*, however, can be overshadowed by other participants' narratives about bioracial preferences in gay dating. Luoma (21), an undergraduate student, downloaded Grindr when he was traveling 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 meant 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, perhaps mainly White men (Farrer, 2010). Similarly, Songjia (29), a game developer, talked about the racial preference that 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 that 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 could 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 high-quality users, others frame the platform in terms of problematic foreign exchanges.[5]

Conclusion

In this study, we examine the general patterns of desiring and being desired in metropolitan Chinese gay men's mobile dating practices. These practices are situated in a polymedia environment (Madianou, 2014) where one can access an array of dating apps. Building upon sexual field theory (Green, 2008, 2014b; Martin & George, 2006), we define *structures of desire* in the sexual field as not only the transpersonal valuations of desirability but also the dominance of particular desires that coordinate actors' expectations and practices. Arguing that the structures of desire vary between apps, we 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 the platform access to users across social classes and territorial divisions and (dis)enabling particular communicative practices in collective sexual life to different extents.

In the sexual field, there are many subfields with distinct structures of desire. For dating app users, to choose the "right" app is to tap into the suitable subfield, where others' dating goals and practices align with theirs, where people are most likely to find each other desirable. On one hand, one may have various dating goals, long term or short term, more romantic or more sexual. Using more than one app can be a strategy to manage differing motives (MacKee, 2016). While MacKee (2016) has highlighted the relation between gay users' motives and the degrees of anonymity afforded by dating apps, we argue that *communicative synchronicity* is also relevant (Wu & Ward, 2020). Specifically, 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 a "speed bump" and thus nourishes users' expectations for lasting connections.

On the contrary, we find that users may expect to connect with a certain group of users by choosing a certain app, echoing Chen and Liu's (2019) study. Focusing on the Chinese diaspora in Australia, Chen and Liu reveal that Chinese women who prefer to date White men tend to use the Western apps Tinder and OkCupid, while those who prefer to date Chinese men gather on the Chinese app Tantan. Meanwhile, target groups intersect with dating goals (Chen & Liu, 2019). Researchers of dating apps or sexual fields should not neglect the relation between these two factors.

In gay dating app studies that attend to intersectionality (e.g., Davis et al., 2016; Ong, 2017; Shield, 2019), researchers acknowledge the relevance of both social class and geolocation, among many other factors. In line with that, we have highlighted our participants' middle-class status and metropolitan residential environments when accounting for their experiences. 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 reserved about their attraction to men.

In comparison, Aloha, Grindr, and Tinder are more specialized sexual sites where the dominant currency of sexual capital clearly takes the form of the middle-class standard for "quality": the broadly defined *zhiliang*, which encompasses *suzhi*.

Our 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 whose social statuses are similar to theirs. This does not mean the sexual field's status structure revolves less around sexual capital than around economic or cultural capital. Instead, it implies that the economic or cultural capital can significantly translate into sexual capital. This is reflected in the way 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.

In addition, even for casual sex, people may consider factors beyond facial and bodily appearance. The stratification of desires among metropolitan gay men shows that *relationalized* casual sex (Wu & Ward, 2020), 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 nonbodily components of sexual capital and further understand how communication technologies mediate collective sexual life.

By broadening the definition of *structures of desire* and proposing new concepts such as *desire sorting* and *stratification of desires*, we aim to enrich sexual field theory such that it can apply to studies of sexual sites with more diverse actors in addition to highly specialized sites with a homogeneous composition. Future research may examine how different components of sexual capital may lead the desire sorting process in different directions. Researchers may also look at how stratifications of desires vary among different groups of people or in different subfields.

This study has its own limitations. Although we had not planned to focus on a specific social class, our participants were effectively confined to the metropolitan middle class. This is largely due to the way we recruited participants. Since the first author primarily used his own social media accounts to post research advertisements, the latter were forwarded by people from his social network and thus unlikely to travel beyond the metropolitan middle-class circle he was located in. Future studies on dating apps may look at less visible groups in China, including nonheterosexual men from lower social classes or living outside metropolises, and account for their experiences.

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Notes

1. The Chinese scholar Lu Xueyi "constructed" the social stratification of Chinese society by the categories of occupation in 2004 (as cited in Rocca, 2017). According to this construction, the "middle strata," or middle class, consists of "professional and technical staff," "office workers," and "industry and trade individual entrepreneurs."
2. At the time of finalizing this article, Aloha has been rebranded as "Fanka" (翻咔).
3. Quan did not say whether it was a phone number. According to the first author's observations, it could also be the number of a communication software account (e.g., the QQ number).
4. Quan said the safety concern was about HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.
5. Interestingly, it seems that Jack'd is not seen as a cosmopolitan space. Jack'd has a much smaller user base outside China than Grindr does. Besides, it gained many users in China in the early days. Therefore, one may not expect to see many foreigners or Chinese users with transnational experiences on Jack'd.

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