



Article

Between sexuality and professionalism: Experiences of gay workers at Blued, a Chinese gay social app company

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sagepub.com/journals-permissionsDOI: [10.1177/1461444820920876](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820920876)journals.sagepub.com/home/nms**Weishan Miao**

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on gay social apps has largely focused on the experiences of their users. In this article, we take a production-side approach to examine the politics of sexuality and professionalism in Blued, a Chinese gay social app company. Based on ethnography at the company and in-depth interviews with its workers, we found that workers at Blued actively weaved their sexual identity into their professional identity. Also, its CEO made use of workers' personal memory and collective hope as a motivating rhetoric, transgressing the boundary between the private and the public. Nonetheless, the collapse of the private-public division is not total, because such division was continuously re-established by the company's corporate external positioning and workers' pragmatic consideration of their career prospect. The case of Blued reveals a highly dynamic relationship between sexuality and professionalism, which sometimes reinforce and sometimes negate each other.

Keywords

Dating app, digital labor, gay men, hookup app, production, professionalism, sexuality, social app

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Most studies concerning sexuality and work, particularly those examining the professional lives of queer workers, have focused on the stress and discrimination people encounter at work and their strategies for resisting heteronormative work cultures (Williams and Giuffre, 2011). With improved social attitudes toward sexual minorities and the implementation of anti-discrimination laws in many Western countries, “gay-friendly workplaces” have emerged. However, even companies with institutional policies in place to protect their queer workers cannot “necessarily guarantee a working environment that engages with and embraces ‘sexual minorities’ or prevents homophobic treatment” (Colgan et al., 2008: 42–43). Queer workers are only accepted into these “gay-friendly workplaces” if they observe expected gender roles (Williams et al., 2009).

A different line of inquiry has been developed to examine “queer organizations,” organizations in which “heteronormativity is questioned, and workers openly express and endorse queer sexuality” (Williams and Giuffre, 2011: 559). Regarding these organizations, the following questions are critical. What kind of political, cultural, and social environments are pertinent to the establishment of queer organizations? Why and how do workers enter these organizations? How do workers understand their sexual and professional identities? What kinds of corporate culture and professionalism are promoted by these organizations? Are workers in these organizations able to overcome the oppression and discrimination associated with heteronormativity?

We believe that answers to this series of questions will expand our understanding of the relationship between sexuality and work, inviting further discussion of identity politics and organizational cultures in queer studies. Unfortunately, few studies of queer organizations have been conducted to date. A major reason is a lack of access: it is not easy for researchers to gain entry to such organizations. However, there have been some notable exceptions, namely studies of the parade department of a theme park (Orzechowicz, 2010), a lesbian-run car repair business (Weston and Rofel, 1984), gay fraternity associations at universities (Yeung et al., 2006), a gay male HIV prevention outreach organization (Deverell, 2001), and several LGBTQ non-governmental organizations (Doyle, 2016; Gould, 2009; Ward, 2008). Unsurprisingly, these studies were all conducted in Europe and the United States, where relatively accepting attitudes toward queer people have given queer organizations the opportunity to develop and flourish. In addition, most of these examples focused on non-profit making organizations or organizations with weak financial pressure. Therefore, based on these studies, it is difficult to decipher the role played by commercial forces in the intersection of sexuality and work.

In this study, therefore, we examine Blued, a gay social app company headquartered in Beijing. In recent years, researchers have examined the global emergence of social apps for queer communities (Chan, 2018; Fitzpatrick and Birnholtz, 2018; Gudelunas, 2012; Licoppe et al., 2016; Zhang and Erni, 2018). But most of these studies, except Murray and Ankerson (2016) and Miao and Chan (forthcoming) as we are aware of, have exclusively focused on the experiences of social app users. We believe that examining the production and development of social apps is as critical as researching the uses of this emerging new media. Blued is a typical queer organization—more than 80% of its approximately 200 workers (including its founder and CEO, Geng Le) self-identify as gay. The company offers social networking, entertainment, and health services to the Chinese gay community,¹ and can therefore be described as a queer organization, that is,

“by gay, for gay, and about gay.” While Blued is often described as the Chinese Grindr, the app has already become the world’s largest gay social app, serving more than 40 million users in 190 countries (Blued, 2018).

For at least two reasons, we believe that the case of Blued provides unique insights for scholarship on sexuality and work. First, Blued represents a paradoxical example. The app operates in a country known for its conservatism regarding the rights of queer people and censorship of queer-related content at state-sponsored events and by state-sponsored media, but it also received public recognition from Li Keqiang, the then-vice premier of China, for its efforts to promote safer sex between men (Miao and Chan, forthcoming). Second, unlike most prior studies, which have focused on non-commercial queer organizations, research on Blued reveals the influence of capital and the market on the relationship between sexuality and work. Blued is a start-up company that has gone through several successful rounds of fundraising in the local capital market since 2013 and plans to go listed in the US stock market in 2020 (Tse et al., 2019). Therefore, this study looks into the contestation between sexuality and professionalism in the context of a commercial organization, filling a gap left by prior studies.

Blued is the first queer commercial organization in China. It has no blueprint to follow. No one knows how to run a queer media company in China, and no one can guide its workers on how they should behave. Therefore, we take a constructivist perspective, examining the dynamics of and relationships between sexuality, work, and professionalism in the company. Based on a 10-month corporate ethnography, numerous field interviews with workers, and post-fieldwork follow-ups with selected workers, we identify three core themes. First, when a gay man joins the company, an identity politics that struggles to integrate sexuality with professionalism emerges. This identity politics becomes the basis for workers to claim legitimacy at work. Second, the company uses the discourse of professionalism to discipline and motivate workers. This discourse also drives sexuality and work apart. Third, workers’ understanding of professionalism departs from that articulated by the company. Their understanding is related to how they view skills, knowledge, and work experience, as well as the larger socio-political context in which Blued operates. In the following, we first review the literature related to sex, work, and professionalism, tracing how sex and work have been separated, integrated, and reinforced each other. Then, we explain our ethnographic method and analytical procedure. Next, we detail our three main research findings. The concluding section shows how the distinction between queerness and respectability is reconfigured in the case of Blued.

Sexuality, work, and professionalism

This study is based on scholarship on sexuality, work, and professionalism. In a traditional organizational context, one’s sexual identity is completely separated from one’s professional identity (Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009). The former is defined as a private and emotional matter, while the latter is considered public and rational. Weston and Rofel (1984) argued that this private–public division or opposition is a dominant feature of US culture. As a distinct feature of modern society, this private–public dichotomy dates back to the rise of industrialization (Engels, 1902). Acker (1990) pointed out that throughout

history, organizations have sought to establish themselves as rational and well-planned institutions by eliminating sexuality from the workplace. Weber (1946) suggested that “bureaucracy develops the more perfectly . . . the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements” (p. 216). Accordingly, the individual marker of queer identity, which was once considered abnormal, illegal, and a sign of mental illness, must be removed from the workplace. This is why early research on queerness and organizations focused on the discrimination faced by queer workers, who violate the separation principle.

Every binary opposition is based on a powerful social norm, which is itself constantly reinforced by the polarization of the opposition. The opposition of public and private can be regarded as a product of capitalism, which celebrates professionalism—efficiency that excludes individual characteristics and considerations. Society not only promotes the separation of private and public but also handsomely rewards those who can suppress or sacrifice their individual needs for their work. For example, a comedian whose family member has recently passed away is still expected to suppress their sadness and deliver joy to their audience in a professional manner. As Woods and Lucas (1993) pointed out, professional discourse is a disciplinary force that glorifies rational individuals who can set private matters aside from their work. Accordingly, the authors found that queer professionals believed that disclosing their sexual identity to colleagues would be “unprofessional.”

Williams and Giuffre (2011) noted that early studies examining the lives of sexual minorities in the workplace mostly fell under the paradigm of sociology of deviance. However, they added, some researchers have recognized that sexuality is a fundamental attribute of humans and, by extension, work; therefore, sexuality should not be set in opposition to professionalism. A different research paradigm—sexuality in organizations—has generated research treating sexuality and professionalism as complementary and integrated. One line of research has looked at sexualized work or gendered work. Hochschild’s (1983) influential study showed that the emotion, sex appeal, and appearance of female flight attendants are part of what they sell to their clients. These workers also use their appearance and sex appeal for career advancement. Chan’s (2019) recent study on the Chinese banking industry showed how female bankers perform masculinity to their male supervisors and clients and retain femininity as a tactic to counteract tension at work. The integration of sexuality with work is not confined to women. Gutek (1989) argued that men utilized their sexuality in workplaces more often than women did, such as by telling sex-related jokes and sexually harassing colleagues.

While research examining the inter-relationship between sex, work, and professionalism among queer workers has been relatively scant, several studies deserve attention. For example, based on interviews with gay workers from a UK National Health Service trust, Rumens and Kerfoot (2009) explored the various ways in which workers articulated their professionalism. They found that although the workplace was gay-friendly, workers still experienced tension between their sexual identity and their professional identity that led them to suppress any expression of their homosexuality at work. The authors wrote that even within a gay-friendly workplace, “dominant ideas about what it is to be professional are premised on the belief that professionalism and sexuality are mutually exclusive” (p. 776).

Tindall and Waters (2012) studied how gay workers in the public relations field perceived their sexual identity and professional identity. Their informants regarded themselves as valuable to their agencies because they were often seen as “cool,” creative, and fashionable due to their sexual orientation. One of their informants said, “That’s maybe a gift of being a minority . . . you may have a different perspective on a lot of things because you live in a different place” (p. 458). Relatedly, Sender (2004) made a similar observation. She found that gay advertising professionals were able to use their insider knowledge to imagine their target market. In these cases, diverging from the sociology of deviance paradigm, sexuality was regarded not as antithetical to professionalism but as a constructive element of it.

The emphasis of research on queer organizations has shifted from queer workers in heterosexual organizations to queer workers in queer organizations. The queer organizations studied in existing research have often been non-commercial entities (e.g. Gould, 2009; Ward, 2008) or small businesses (e.g. Weston and Rofel, 1984). Deverell’s (2001) study of an HIV prevention outreach service is particularly relevant to our case. Deverell found that some workers had been hired because their sexual orientation had given them knowledge of the community they would serve. Therefore, sexuality was a major marker of their professional identity. Gay workers in this category neither encountered discrimination due to their sexuality nor were forced to hide their sexuality at work; instead, they actively used sexuality to build up their professional identity.

Putting Blued—a non-Western, highly commercialized organization—in conversation with the literature discussed above, we ask the following questions. Why and how do workers enter Blued? What kind of professionalism does Blued cultivate? How do queer Blued workers perceive the relationship between their sexuality and their professionalism?

Method and data

The data used in this article were obtained from three complementary sources: a 10-month ethnographic study at Blued, 32 field interviews with Blued workers, and post-fieldwork follow-ups with 11 selected workers. This in-depth engagement with the company allowed us to gain insights from the position of an “insider.”

Specifically, our first author contacted Blued for the first time in 2016. When conducting ethnographic research, the first step is to gain access (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Researchers must negotiate access with the gatekeeper of the field site and establish relationships and trust with people from the site. At first, the company was not interested in the research project. In 2017, our first author volunteered to coordinate Blued’s activities at New York’s Pride event. After the event, he gained the trust of Geng Le, the company’s founder and CEO, who granted him permission to conduct fieldwork in the headquarters. From October 2017 to July 2018, our first author worked for five days per week at the company, like its other employees. His identity as a researcher was known to all. Being an on-site ethnographer gave him firsthand insights into the company’s practices and policies. Furthermore, our first author also practiced what Geertz (1998) called “deep hanging out” with Blued workers. That is, not only did he interact with the workers

on work-related issues, but he also befriended with them on an informal level, joining parties and gatherings organized by the company and workers themselves.

Second, during the fieldwork, our first author conducted ethnographic interviews (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011) with 32 workers. He noted that the workers were willing to openly discuss their views on sex, work, and professionalism with him, perhaps because he was older than most of them, was highly educated (with a PhD), and used to work in human resources management. These workers were aged between 22 and 40 (with 27 as the average age). They worked in various departments: management, IT support, reproductive health, marketing, public relations, business development, human resources, customer services, and so on.

Their educational backgrounds varied: some had doctoral degrees, some had obtained master's degrees overseas, some had graduated from bachelor's degrees at renowned Chinese universities, and some had only high school diplomas. Before joining Blued, some had worked in government bodies, leading technology companies, or financial institutions; others were nurses, teachers, cooks, or sales personnel. Their tenure at Blued also varied significantly, ranging from 1 month to 7 years. Some left Blued during the fieldwork, but a few subsequently rejoined the company.

These field interviews were not pre-arranged; they were conducted organically at the field site. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) explained that "a casual exchange of remarks, or a lull in the action, signals that the moment is right to ask a 'research' question" (p. 176). For example, when our first author and a worker from the business development department were waiting for a client, they started talking about their former job experience. The worker told our first author that he used to be a translator. Surprised that the worker had switched from translation to business development, our first author asked him why he had joined Blued, how he perceived his sexual identity and professional identity, and how he viewed his career prospects.

Third, our first author followed up with 11 of his informants after concluding his fieldwork in July 2018. He kept up to date with their WeChat posts and periodically hung out with them. Every few months, they met up as "old friends," having meals, singing karaoke, shopping, and watching movies. These post-fieldwork follow-ups allowed us to collect more comprehensive and processual data. McFadden (2015) pointed out that longitudinal methods have never been applied in research on queer workers and organizations, although such an approach is critical to the understanding of career and identity development, which is a longitudinal process. By following up with the workers, we were able to trace their mobility. For example, we were able to determine whether they continued working for Blued, the reasons why they stayed or left, and how their experience at Blued continued to shape their sexual identity.

Our research team repeatedly reviewed the memos created during the fieldwork and transcripts of the interviews. Some of the data on Blued's operation obtained during this research have been reported elsewhere. In this article, we focus on data that hinted at or mentioned the delicate relationship between the workers' sexuality and the way they perceived their work. We conducted a two-cycle coding process (Miles et al., 2014). We performed the first cycle coding for each relevant paragraph. In the process, we continuously compared new codes and existing codes, and occasionally adjusted some of our previous codes. In the second cycle coding, we grouped the codes from the first cycle

according to their common themes. We identified three themes, which are reported in detail below. We then re-coded the data set based on the second cycle codes.

We translated all of the Chinese materials into English. To protect our informants' identity, pseudonyms were used.

“I am gay, so I am a professional worker”: reconciling sexual identity and professional identity

Kevin was 24 years old. He had started working after high school, taking the roles of restaurant server, hair salon assistant, and sales assistant in a clothing store. To him, all of these jobs were solely to make a living. In 2016, he was hired by Blued as a content moderator responsible for checking whether the profiles of Blued users contained any pornographic or illegal information. Although this was a very tedious and repetitive job, Kevin was happy:

Since I was 12, I have known that I am gay. At school or at work, I have always felt I am different from others. I was too afraid to tell others [about my sexuality], so my life was tough. After I moved here, my colleagues around were [gay], so I didn't have to be worried.

Many other Blued workers shared Kevin's experience of hiding their sexuality in their previous heteronormative workplaces. To them, Blued stood for freedom, authenticity, and liberation. Even more importantly, they said that being gay is an asset at Blued. Kevin said, “In the past, [being gay] was an obstacle. I had never imagined that [being gay] would become an advantage at work. Gay workers definitely know more about gay users than straight workers do.”

Many of our informants told us that most of the pressure they had experienced in heteronormative workplaces was not direct, serious discrimination based on their sexuality but pressure and awkwardness from everyday interactions with colleagues, especially having conversations related to marriage and child-rearing—issues that may be less widely applicable to queer workers than to straight workers (Rumens, 2011). For example, Alex described the following experience:

Whenever my colleagues [in my old company] and I talked about my “girlfriend,” I had to come up with a story. Then, the next time we chatted, they would ask for details. There were several occasions I forgot what lies I had told earlier. It was mentally draining.

Queer workers who choose not to discuss their personal lives with their colleagues may feel alienated in the workplace (Barak, 2005). Therefore, it was no surprise that our informants described their transition into Blued as “liberating.” Workers like David were even willing to sacrifice the higher salaries they had received in their previous workplaces to move to Blued, where they felt “more comfortable.”

Our literature review shows that in the past, workers were expected to keep their private lives separate from their public identity as workers. At Blued, however, this private-public division was permeable. We found that some Blued workers had integrated their sexual identity into their professional identity. Kevin asked, “Why can't I be gay and

professional at the same time? My job is to serve the gay community. The gayer I am, the more I understand my clients, the more capable and professional I am for this position.” Here, Kevin described a renewed sexual politics in which professional legitimacy is built upon the association between one’s sexuality and responsibilities at work. The private–public dichotomy thus collapses in the sense that personal qualities from the private sphere—here, sexual identity—are transformed into essential components of the public sphere at work.

The connection between sexuality and work was not only articulated in the workers’ narratives but constructed and reinforced through the various interactions between the company and its workers. This dynamic started at the recruitment stage. Due to his previous work experience, our first author was invited to sit on the interview panel. Usually, after a formal self-introduction, the panel chair asked each candidate to specify their sexual orientation. When our first author encountered this for the first time, he was shocked by this apparent intrusion on candidates’ privacy. However, the panel chair said, “If they are gay, they should admit it openly. How can I trust them to be a good worker if they cannot admit their identity?” The phrase “they should admit it openly” takes it for granted that a gay man will come to a stage where he no longer struggles with his sexuality and accepts it as it is. While researchers such as Kaufman and Johnson (2004) have critiqued this stage model of identity, being able to embrace one’s sexual identity and identify with the gay community is perceived as a basis for professionalism at Blued. Similar to the HIV prevention outreach service workers studied by Deverell (2001), some of the Blued workers involved in our study believed that they had been hired because of their sexuality. Philip said, “I joined because this is a gay company; they probably hired me because I am gay.”

Moreover, as a queer organization, Blued has infused its corporate culture with queer elements. These include rainbow flags everywhere in the company, gender-neutral washrooms, and gay-related jokes between workers and managers during meetings and everyday conversations. This infusion at the level of everyday work continuously reinforces workers’ sexual identity, similar to Orzechowicz’s (2010) observation that queer workers in the parade department of a theme park often challenged heteronormative masculinity backstage.

Our findings suggested that at Blued, the reconciliation of sexuality—homosexuality, to be specific—and work is also carried out by excluding heterosexuality. Blued, as a gay social app company, is involved in the production and management of desire, affect, and social networking in the gay community (Wang, 2019). As the gay community is unique in its subculture, language, and norms, an understanding of gay users and the gay community is crucial to Blued’s operation. We observed that some heterosexual workers at Blued were not familiar with gay culture, which was frequently used as a strategy by gay workers to strengthen their professional status. In a meeting on interface re-design, for example, a heterosexual male worker suggested moving the information on “top/bottom”² to a less prominent location, and was immediately ridiculed by his gay colleagues: “Don’t you know that this is the most important information for gay socializing? We can ignore photos, distance, and even age, height, and weight, but we must know if the other is top or bottom!” The connection between their gay identity and professional identity was the site at which Blued’s gay workers derived their legitimacy

at work. In highlighting the commensurability of these two identities, the gay workers excluded heterosexuality from professionalism.

In short, our study provides evidence of the collapse of the division between private and public, or between sexuality and work. First, workers at Blued felt liberated because they no longer had to hide their sexual orientation from their colleagues. For the first time, they were in the majority in the workplace. Second, the company itself has incorporated sexual identity into its corporate culture, including recruitment procedures and everyday working lives. Third, gay workers at Blued have actively rejected heterosexuality as a legitimate basis for professionalism. Nonetheless, the collapse of this division is not total, as it is continuously re-established by other corporate practices, which we turn to next.

“We are a professional company” and “we are a family”: the rhetoric of professionalism at Blued

During the company’s annual general meeting in 2017, Geng Le became angry because he felt that the organization of the meeting was insufficiently professional:

I am particularly angry because the purpose of this annual general meeting is not only to get all of you to come and eat. If that had been the case, I’d have paid everyone 200 yuan. The purpose of our annual meeting is more about showing the outside world how aspiring and respectful [the company] is. And how can you accomplish this? You need professionalism. For example, a special event is designed with beautiful cakes; then a professional photographer shoots the cakes, along with beautiful flowers and smiles all round; finally, professional public relations personnel upload these exquisite photographs with moving captions to Weibo. We must at least make everyone [outside] think we are professional.

In the last section, we discuss how a strong connection between sexuality and work has been forged by workers themselves and how sexual identity has become a basis for professionalism at Blued. However, due to Blued’s commercial nature, in contrast with LGBTQ activist groups or non-profit-making organizations, the logic of capital plays a critical role in shaping professionalization at the company.

Blued’s history can be traced back to 2000, when Geng Le first published a personal blog that he ran in his free time. The blog later became an online forum called *danlan.org*. During this phase, the company consisted of only a dozen people, who lived together in an apartment in a suburban area of Beijing. The workers took turns to cook for each other. “It was like a family,” Harry recalled. In the eyes of senior workers, during the company’s early phase, workers came together because of their shared sexual identity; discussions about exploring new financial and human resources focused on survival rather than professionalization.

In 2012, Blued was launched as a mobile app. It quickly became the most popular dating and social app for the Chinese gay community. According to its official website, the app received its first round of funding from an angel investor, amounting to CNY3 million, less than a year after its founding. As of February 2018, Blued had successfully completed seven rounds of fundraising and was serving 40 million users worldwide

(Blued, 2018). Realizing commercial goals—attracting as many users as possible, developing a sustainable business model, demonstrating its profitability to its investors, and ultimately going public—has required Blued to undergo professionalization at the corporate level.

To be recognized as a professional corporation, Blued must follow the set of rules and expectations of the “field.” According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), each field has its own set of practices and rules. Actors, occupying different positions in the field, strategize to compete for and exchange various kinds of resources. As going public is Blued’s current goal, it is subject to the rules and expectations of the corporate world.

The corporate professionalization of Blued entails both external positioning and internal governance. Externally, Blued positions itself as a “leading live streaming interactive application and health education platform” (Blued, 2018), downplaying its relationship with the gay community and sexuality. This practice corresponds to the traditional view that sexuality should be kept separate from the workplace. Ian, a senior manager, emphasized that Blued is a professional organization:

Many people have misunderstandings about our company, thinking that it is just a group of gay men working together. What we try to highlight to the public is that Blued is a professional company and that we are the world’s largest queer social app in terms of users.

As well as distancing itself from sexuality, Blued is moving closer to other technology companies. First, as recommended by an investor, Blued moved its headquarters from its original suburban location to the city center, where other technology companies are located. Location is important because it gives investors confidence that the company is eager to develop. In addition, on its website, Blued highlights that its senior staff members have worked at renowned technology companies such as Baidu and Sina, suggesting that Blued is on par with these leading companies.

Regarding internal governance, we noted that Blued follows the practices of renowned technology companies. On the first day of work, the first author was asked to install a check-in app to record his attendance. Joseph from the human resources department explained that the company does this “because other leading companies are doing so. As a professional company, this is just a basic setup.” Workers are also subject to annual performance appraisal based on an industry-wide system.

Besides the implementation of industry-wide governing practices, CEO Geng Le articulates his view of professionalism verbally. At each of the company’s monthly meetings, Geng Le gives a speech re-iterating the vision and values of the company. In the speeches our first author heard during the fieldwork, the following three key motifs were repeated and strategically combined to construct the kind of professionalism Blued wants:

1. *We are a family.* Although Blued is no longer run from an apartment in suburban Beijing in which workers cook for each other, it still maintains a close link with the gay community. Through the rhetoric of “We are a family” and “We are part of the community,” the boundaries between the individual, community, and company are erased, transforming workers’ individual pursuit of gay identity and their recognition of the gay community into loyalty to the company.

2. *Our journey has never been easy.* At these monthly meetings, Geng Le's goal is to encourage his workers, create a consensus, and mobilize everyone to work harder. As most workers have experienced different levels of pressure working in heteronormative workplaces and living in a conservative country, this tragic narrative is extremely effective in creating resonance, thus binding workers to the company affectively.
3. *We must cherish the present and work hard for the future.* While the tragic narrative calls on memory, this rhetoric brings workers into the present and suggests actions that they should take now. To gain respect from society, each worker must strive to excel in their job—to be a professional. We found that many of our informants deeply identified with this narrative because they desired to be accepted by society.

Geng Le's tripartite rhetoric shows how the company generates a consensus among its workers to ensure their professionalism based on what they have experienced in the past and desire for the future. Orzechowicz (2010) urged researchers to “critically explore the ways in which work organizations capitalize on local, worker-produced cultures to garner worker consent, extract additional labor, or serve a specific group of consumers” (p. 249). We show that Blued makes use of workers’ shared memory and collective hope, re-packaging professionalism as the rhetoric of “We are a family; let’s work harder together.” This aspect of internal governance transgresses the boundary between the private and the public, or in other words, converts affect from workers’ personal lives into motivation in their work lives. Paradoxically, Blued’s external positioning efforts—setting it apart from sexuality and moving it closer to other technology companies—reinforce this boundary.

“Working here is like a dream coming true, but the time to wake up will come”: pragmatism of workers

Unlike Kevin, who began working after high school, Peter completed a degree in journalism at a highly reputed university. Upon graduation, he took a position at a Party-based newspaper. He quit on his first day of work: “I am gay, but that place is too repressive.” He then joined the public relations department of Blued, where he was responsible for managing its corporate image. For personal reasons, he left Blued for a short time and then rejoined. A couple of years later, he became the most senior staff member in the department, believing that he would be given the role of head of the department, which had been vacant for a while. However, the company hired someone younger than Peter to fill the role. In Peter’s eyes, this person was chosen because he had worked at a famous public relations agency. “I was so silly. I should not have come [to Blued] in the first place. I should have gone to a big or famous company. That would have benefited my career development.” In August 2019, when our first author contacted Peter again, he had left Blued for good and said that he was certain not to return.

To Peter, being professional meant having experience of working in major companies in the field. What about the other workers? What did they think about professionalism? During a team lunch, our first author asked the following question. “Who do you think

are professional workers at Blued?" Everyone was very interested in this question, and the discussion lasted for about an hour. There was a consensus that professionalism was related to knowledge and skills. The workers at the team lunch identified three levels of professional workers at Blued. The most professional departments were technology development, international business development, and reproductive health, followed by marketing, public relations, and commercial collaboration. The least professional departments were operations, customer services, and human resources management. There was a clear pattern: the more specialized the job was, the more professional it was considered. One worker described this pattern as follows:

Professionalism means that there is a certain level of skill required for the job; that is, only you, not others can do the job. If anyone can do it, if you can be replaced at any time, so what professionalism is there?

As mentioned earlier, the workers were proud of being gay at work and saw their sexual identity as a valuable component of their professional identity. Nonetheless, they also recognized the downside of this kind of professionalism. Philip lamented, "All my knowledge and expertise come from my understanding of the gay community. If I leave Blued, where can I go?" In this case, being too specialized in the gay market could prove an obstacle to Philip's professional development in another industry or company.

Philip mentioned future career development. Based on our fieldwork and interviews, a significant concern highlighted by the workers was their individual success. The workers had constructed a kind of professionalism defined by its pragmatic value—whether they would be promoted or should look for a better job opportunity elsewhere. We do not deny that this pragmatism is closely related to the maximization of income, an important theme of capitalism. However, we also note that this pragmatism emerges from China's workplace reality and complex socio-political environment, which we detail below.

Regarding workplace reality, most of the workers had hoped to reconcile their gay identity with their professional identity when they first joined Blued. However, they gradually realized that Blued is a workplace with deadlines and high performance expectations. Furthermore, a new employee makes around CNY6000 per month. However, the average rental cost of an apartment in downtown Beijing, near the company, is around CNY5000 per month, which is too expensive for an average worker. Therefore, several of our informants had to share an apartment in the suburbs, distant from the company. With tremendous work and financial pressure, the joy of the initial celebration of their sexual identity had gradually dissipated. As sexuality became less important to their identity, they had turned to more pragmatic considerations, such as making more money or exploring other job opportunities.

Another factor contributing to the workers' pragmatism was the uncertainty of Chinese politics. As the country is highly conservative, especially under Xi Jinping, every worker we interviewed at Blued was worried about the future of the company. Even Geng Le said, "The government could shut Blued down in the name of safeguarding morality and decency." This worry is not completely ungrounded. Zank, another popular app for gay men, and Tantan, an app mainly for the heterosexual users, were shut down by the government in 2017 and 2019, respectively, due to their pornographic

content. This unpredictability had pushed the workers, who on average were just 27 years old, to plan the next steps in their careers if they were forced to leave Blued. This consideration had also slowly taken away their joy of living outed lives in the company and pushed them to focus on sharpening their skills.

At a gathering of Blued's workers that included our first author, Samuel said the following:

Working here is like a dream coming true, but the time to wake up will come. You just cannot stay at Blued for life. You must plan for your future. Once you leave Blued door, no one will make a deal with you simply because you are gay. The only reliable asset is your skill.

These remarks succinctly summarize the content of this section. First, working at Blued is a dream for many gay workers, because they can finally be open about their sexuality at work. Second, for various reasons, workers do not consider working at Blued a lifelong plan. Third, they know that they must develop their skills and knowledge to become professionals under a framework of professionalism in a queer organization.

Discussion and conclusion

As mentioned in our literature review, there have been three paradigms in the scholarship on sexuality and work: the sociology of deviance, sexuality in organizations, and queer organizations (Williams and Giuffre, 2011). During the 1970s, when homosexuality began to gradually be de-stigmatized, researchers shifted their focus from theorizing homosexuality as a deviant behavior to exploring the struggle for power and equality (Anteby and Anderson, 2014). Related questions about justice, discrimination, and heteronormativity occupy a prominent position on the scholarly agenda under the paradigm of sexuality in organizations. Studies based on the paradigm of queer organizations, on the other hand, have regarded the organizations under study as “an alternative to both the closet and to homonormativity” (Williams and Giuffre, 2011: 559).³ Rather than presenting gay men and lesbians as model employees who deserve the same level of respect as their heterosexual counterparts do, researchers working under this paradigm are more interested in discovering sexual diversity and queer desires within an organizational setting (see Orzechowicz, 2010; Rupp and Taylor, 2003). However, “can an organization be both ‘queer’ and ‘respectable?’” (Ward, 2008, cited in Williams and Giuffre, 2011: 560). This is an empirical question. Williams and Giuffre (2011) were pessimistic, arguing that “a respectably queer organization is an unrealized goal, at least in the United States” (p. 560). In his study of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Doyle (2016) also concluded that, for sexual minorities to be included in the dominant social institutions, sexual diversity is often sacrificed. Blued, which is “by gay, for gay, and about gay,” exemplifies a queer organization in China. What can the case of Blued tell us about the relationship between queerness and respectability?

Based on our fieldwork and interviews at Blued, we report that some workers decided to come to the company because they believed that doing so would enable them to reconcile their private lives as gay men with their public-facing profession. We also show that Geng Le's monthly speeches repeatedly articulate a connection between workers'

sexual identity, their recognition of the gay community, and their commitment to the company, transgressing the boundary between private and public. Our observations are in line with Deverell's (2001). In her study of gay male HIV prevention outreach workers, she pointed out that "these workers have a professional concern defined in terms of sex and sexuality, work in sexual environments with sexually defined target group, and are often employed by their own sexuality" (p. xiii). Therefore, the assumption that queerness and respectability are mutually exclusive is not always valid.

That said, we believe that the boundary between queerness and respectability has not completely collapsed at Blued. This argument may appear to contradict the dual success of the company: political, for its government-recognized efforts to promote safer sex between men, and financial, for smoothly raising millions from the domestic capital market (Miao and Chan, forthcoming). These achievements can be regarded as evidence demonstrating that an organization can be queer and respectable at the same time. Nonetheless, we argue that for each of these achievements, queerness has been reduced to either a health issue or a source of profit. First, Blued's cooperation with the health department to promote safer sex in China is a survival strategy that highlights its pragmatic value and public health contribution to the country (Miao and Chan, forthcoming). In this article, we show that Blued positions itself as a "health education platform." The affective, relational, and cultural aspects of queerness are entirely ignored in this positioning. Second, the company attracts handsome investment because it is tapping into China's emerging "pink economy" (Miao and Chan, forthcoming). While researchers have demonstrated that the image of affluent gay men is a construction by the media and marketing agencies (Henderson, 2013; Sender, 2004), gay men are still imagined and packaged by Blued and its network of investors as a market segment with high disposable income. Therefore, the apparent integration of queerness and respectability is enabled by flattening queerness into elements that can be incorporated into China's existing political and capitalist logics.

Moreover, at the individual level, we reveal that while new Blued employees envision a professional life with a dominant gay identity, they realize sooner or later that they cannot base their future career prospects entirely on their sexual identity. Instead, due to the reality of the workplace and the complex socio-political environment, they gradually develop a pragmatic view that predicates their ultimate success on their skills and experiences, not their sexuality. Furthermore, although it is evident that Blued as an organization presents a "coming-out" opportunity to its workers, many of these workers are not able to afford the middle-class lifestyle as prescribed by homonormativity. Our case of Blued has answered Brown's (2012) call to expand queer inquiry into "ordinary homosexuality as they are lived and understood in ordinary cities and other [non-Western] locations" (p. 1069). Therefore, even if we entertain the idea that queerness and respectability can come together at the individual level, as demonstrated by Western, White, and middle-class gay men, this option is not available to Blued workers.

As the first queer commercial organization in China, Blued offers a rich opportunity to investigate the dynamics of the relationships between private and public, sexuality and professionalism, queerness and respectability. In this article, we look into the permeability of these boundaries. We show that workers' former experiences in heteronormative workplaces motivate them to seek to reconcile their sexual identity and professional

identity at Blued. However, we also consider the role of the political circumstances of China and financial considerations, which have been absent from many prior studies of this issue conducted in the West, in re-establishing the above boundaries. The case of Blued reveals a highly dynamic relationship between sexuality and professionalism, which sometimes reinforce and sometimes negate each other.

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Notes

1. The Chinese gay community is not a monolithic group. Queer theory also challenges the existence of a gay “community.” However, we use the term “community” in its singular form in this article because workers at Blued saw their targeted users as a homogeneous group. Sender (2004) discussed how a gay “community” is constructed by marketers and the media industry.
2. “Top” and “bottom” refer to one’s preferred position during anal intercourse.
3. In brief, homonormativity refers to the idea that queer people can fit into mainstream society by conforming to heteronormative ideals and practices. Very often, only Western, White, and middle-class gay men are able to conform to such ideals and practices (see Brown, 2012; Duggan, 2002).

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