

Domesticating Gay Apps: An Intersectional Analysis of the Use of Blued Among Chinese Gay Men

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Drawing on domestication theory and intersectionality theory, this study explores the multiple roles dating apps play in Chinese gay men's lives amid changing personal and social circumstances. We present in-depth narratives of three Blued users from different generations and classes with unique relationship statuses. The app's geo-locative features strengthened the gay capital of our younger participant but threatened our middle-aged, closeted participant. Although coming from a homophobic generation, our senior participant had no issue becoming an online celebrity on the app because his wife had passed away, pointing out the intersectional influence of generational and relational backgrounds. Our participants' socio-economic positions also shaped whom they would interact with on Blued and how these interactions took place. These observations illustrate the relationship between users' intersectional positions and their domestication of Blued, complementing existing dating app studies that skew toward younger users and focus only on certain elements of app use.

Keywords: Blued, Dating Apps, Domestication, Intersectionality, Oral History, Social Apps

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While the complexity and contradictions that come with the emergence of dating app culture have influenced gay men from all walks of life, most studies worldwide of gay dating apps skew toward younger users (e.g., [Albury & Byron, 2016](#); [Wang, 2019](#)). Further, existing dating app studies often focus on certain uses or certain elements of user behavior, examining, for example, motivations ([Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017](#)), image management ([Ward, 2017](#)), or interactions ([Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018](#)). However, as [Baym \(2006\)](#) writes, “the Internet is woven into the fabric of the rest of life” (p. 86), we similarly believe that the use of dating apps is embedded in users' everyday lives. To more comprehensively decipher the multiple roles that dating apps play in gay men's lives, we argue that we must broaden our focus to consider all of the issues they encounter in their particular personal and social circumstances.

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To complement existing studies of app use, which focus on younger users and particular uses of apps, this study combines domestication theory and intersectionality theory to analyze how Chinese gay men of different generations, relationship statuses, and classes make use of, or domesticate, dating apps. Based on a three-year study (2016–2019) of Blued, a social app tailored to gay men in China,¹ we examine how the multiple roles of Blued is intertwined with gay men's personal and social circumstances.

Domestication theory originates in media and communication studies and considers how media technologies are “doubly articulated into our domesticity” (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992, p. 4). The theory pays attention to how a technology is absorbed into the everyday lives of its users and their communities under specific social circumstances (Haddon, 2011). Intersectionality theory was originally developed to examine the multiplied effects of race and gender in discrimination against women of color (Hancock, 2016), but is now also used in gay studies to reveal the prejudice and exclusion based on race, gender, and age within gay communities (Nakamura, 2002). Combining domestication theory and intersectionality theory provides us with a pathway to understand the use of dating apps by gay men that is more grounded in everyday life and more attentive to the multiple levels of domination (Collins, 1991).

In this article, we situate our study in the recent scholarship on the use of dating apps among gay men, paying attention particularly to studies conducted in China. We elaborate on the relevance of domestication theory and intersectionality theory to our study. We then describe our oral history methodology. In our three-year study, we followed 12 Blued users from different generations and classes with various relationship arrangements. To show that the use of Blued is intertwined with individuals' life experiences, we present in-depth narratives of three users, supplemented with the narratives of others. Our analysis emphasizes the agency of these users, detailing the distinct ways in which they domesticate Blued.

Literature review

Chinese gay men and their use of dating apps

Although homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997 and depathologized in 2001, only 21% of the population in China accepts homosexuality (Pew Research Center, 2013). This figure is much lower than the 54% in Japan and 39% in South Korea. The Chinese government also does not endorse same-sex relationships (Zhang, 2020). As same-sex intimacy is still highly sanctioned in Chinese society, apps such as Blued provide gay men with opportunities to meet other gay men virtually. Headquartered in Beijing, Blued is the first and currently the largest gay app in China, with around 25 million registered users in the country (Qian & Woo, 2020). Unlike Grindr and other Western gay apps, Blued is a multi-functional platform. Users can browse other users nearby like on Grindr, post regular updates about themselves like on Facebook, broadcast and watch live streaming like on TikTok, or start a discussion thread on various topics like on Reddit, for example. There are other gay apps operating in China (e.g., Aloha, Jack'd), but they are much smaller in terms of user numbers.

Several researchers have explored the use of these apps among Chinese gay men. One study compares the self-presentations of Chinese gay men with those of American gay men on Jack'd (Chan, 2016) and finds that Chinese gay men are less likely to upload a photograph of their face than their American counterparts, reflecting the greater stigma of homosexuality in China. Looking at relationship development, Wu and Ward (2020) find that although Chinese gay social app users use these platforms to look for sex, they often resist the blunt, direct expressions of sexual desires and

preferences; instead, they expect an interesting, sustainable conversation with potential casual sex partners. Large-scale survey studies examine risky sexual behaviors among Chinese gay app users (Luo et al., 2019). Blued's live streaming feature has also attracted scholarly attention. This feature allows viewers to buy virtual gifts for a live streamer, who can then convert those gifts into money. Wang (2019) finds that viewers, particularly older and richer viewers, are comfortable using gifts in exchange for online same-sex companionship that is not available to them in their offline, heterosexual lives. However, he also finds that drag live streamers are dismissed by some viewers, thereby reinforcing the preference for masculine performance embedded in homonormativity.

These studies, collectively, provide a preliminary understanding of Chinese gay dating app culture. However, they also illustrate the two problems in dating app scholarship that we identify in the introduction. First, they focus on younger users. For example, participants in the study by Wu and Ward (2020) are aged from 20- to 31-years-old. Second, each of these studies singles out a particular element of app use, such as self-presentation (Chan, 2016) or live stream viewing (Wang, 2019), and does not adequately consider how the different life experiences of gay men shape and are shaped by the use of these apps. To address these weaknesses, we draw on domestication theory and intersectionality theory to look holistically at the integration of Blued into its users' everyday lives.

Domestication theory

Unlike theories that assume a linear adoption process, such as the diffusion of innovation theory and technology acceptance model, domestication theory takes a dynamic, iterative approach to examine both the symbolic meanings and material practices of media technologies in our everyday lives (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). Specifically, the theory pays attention to both users' subjectivities and the circumstances of their media usage. Domestication theory highlights the ways in which users construct their subjectivity through their everyday engagement with technology and the actual scenarios where domestication occurs. The theory introduces four concepts—appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion—to describe the actual process through which a technological product becomes part of a user's life (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992). Appropriation is the acquisition of the technology. Objectification allows users to express tastes and values by placing and displaying the technology in their households. Incorporation refers to the use of the technology in certain situations. Lastly, conversion reflects the influence the technology may have on the interactions between users. Domestication theory is particularly suitable for tackling micro-level issues, such as how we interpret the meaning of technology and how we experience technology (Haddon, 2003).

As the term "domestication" suggests, the theory is primarily concerned with how we tame a "wild," external object and incorporate it into our household. Our ever-changing new media environment constantly creates new "wild" technologies. For instance, constant system updates force users to re-domesticate what has already been domesticated (Bertel & Ling, 2016; Huang & Miao, 2020). Scholars have applied the theory to understand the use of social media, such as Facebook (Sujon, Viney, & Toker-Turnalar, 2018) and WhatsApp (Matassi, Boczkowski, & Mitchelstein, 2019).

Grindr and other gay dating apps have caught the attention of the public and scholars due to their controversial social impact. The majority of research looking at gay dating apps focuses on particular elements of user behavior. The narrow focus of this stream of research has left some questions unanswered. How are dating apps embedded in the lives of gay men? How do gay men from different backgrounds use dating apps differently? If we lack a thorough understanding of the lives of gay men, we cannot decipher the role dating apps play in their lives.

Thus far, the application of domestication theory in gay dating app studies has been limited. According to [Møller and Petersen \(2018\)](#), early domestication studies stress that a new technology disrupts the normality of a household. This explains why sexual minorities, who have always been outside family norms, have been overlooked by domestication researchers. The study by [Møller and Petersen \(2018\)](#) is the first to apply the domestication framework to the study of gay dating app culture. It describes how gay couples, both monogamous and non-monogamous, domesticate Grindr and other apps into their intimate sphere. Following them, we use the domestication framework to examine Chinese gay men's use of Blued.

As noted by domestication theorists, each user is unique. [Hynes's \(2009\)](#) study of the domestication of the Internet by Irish families shows that we cannot treat users as a homogeneous group, because the attributes of each user—gender, age, class, and so on—affect how technology is understood. [Nimrod's \(2016\)](#) analysis of older Europeans reveals the influence of personal and cultural backgrounds on the degree to which they incorporate mobile phones into their lives. Accordingly, we combine domestication theory with intersectionality theory to highlight how personal and social circumstances affect the process of domestication.

Intersectionality and the use of gay apps

[Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality \(1989\)](#) proposes that the oppression faced by women of color comes from what [Collins \(1991\)](#) calls a matrix of domination. Intersectionality theory requires analysts to look at individuals' multiple identities and the resultant multiple kinds of oppression. The theory argues that although individuals from a certain social category have some similar characteristics, differences exist because of the internal hierarchies of race, nationality, and other dimensions of identities ([Yuval-Davis, 2006](#)). As [Hancock \(2016\)](#) points out, intersectionality should be considered as an a priori assumption about the social world and human practices. This attention to differences between individuals resonates with domestication theory which considers the variations between users of different backgrounds and their different ways of domesticating technology ([Hynes, 2009](#); [Nimrod, 2016](#)).

Drawing on this theoretical insight, many scholars have moved beyond the context of women of color to adopt an intersectional lens in research on various populations and subject matters ([Yuval-Davis, 2006](#)). A number of LGBTQ studies have been informed by intersectionality theory, examining such topics as participation in rights activism ([Swank & Fahs, 2013](#)) and immigration ([Epstein & Carrillo, 2014](#)).

[Shield \(2018, 2019\)](#) extends intersectional analysis to the study of gay dating apps. Racism on dating apps is prevalent ([Daroya, 2018](#)). Instead of treating racism as a form of unidimensional oppression, [Shield \(2018\)](#) illustrates how racial discrimination against immigrants on Grindr in Greater Copenhagen intersects with sexism and ableism. For instance, he reports the story of a transgender woman from Asia who was often mistaken as a sex worker because of the association between sex tourism and Southeast Asia. Further, his informants report seeing Grindr profiles that explicitly request men of certain body types and a certain serostatus. [Shield \(2019\)](#) also notes that White Grindr users prefer black tourists to black immigrants, because they associate the latter group with economic opportunism. His use of intersectionality theory to analyze racism on Grindr exposes the dynamics between nationality, immigration status, sex, body shape, and health status. Apart from [Shield \(2018, 2019\)](#), research into how users of different intersectional identities make use of dating apps is still scant.

We believe that domestication theory and intersectionality theory can together contribute to the study of Chinese gay men's use of dating apps. The focus in domestication theory on the process of domestication by different users can be complemented by attention to the multiple identities and multiple axes of oppression identified by intersectionality theory. In this article, we ask the following question: what role does Blued play in the different circumstances of gay men? In particular, we illustrate how generational, relational, and class differences have intersectionally influenced the domestication of Blued.

Method

This study was part of a larger project (2016–2019) that examined the emergence of Blued. Part of this project involved corporate ethnography at the headquarters of Blued in Beijing. In addition to interviewing staff members, we also interviewed 63 Blued users living in China to understand what the app meant to them and how they used the app. These users were recruited from various channels: on Blued, through activities organized by non-governmental organizations, and through snowball sampling.

We invited 12 of these users to participate in extended oral history interviews. The users were selected primarily based on their age: three were between 20- and 30-years-old, five were between 30- and 50-years-old, and four were above 50-years-old. We included older users because existing studies of dating apps tend to focus on younger users. Our participants also varied in terms of class, relationship status, city of origin and residence, and education level.

Our first author regularly engaged in one-on-one online and phone conversations with each of the participants. Topics of discussion included, but were not limited to, their attitudes toward and experiences of intimate relationships, plans for the future, and the use of Blued. Over the entire research period, except for one participant whom we only met once, our first author met all of the participants at least twice (and up to six times). Each meeting lasted for around three hours. These 12 participants were also added to a WeChat chat group, where they often posted photos of their everyday lives, interesting news concerning sexual minorities, and, very often, their concerns and worries about their intimate relationships. The participants agreed that anything they shared on this chat group could be used in this study. The data for this article are from these online and offline interactions.

Our interviews with the 12 participants used an oral history approach. The purpose of oral history research is to “give a voice to individuals and groups often ignored by orthodox histories” (Cockcroft, 2005, p. 366). An advantage of this approach over other interview techniques (e.g., respondent interview, informant interview) is its attention to participants' narratives. As Lindlof and Taylor (2011) point out, “narrative inquiry is concerned with the study of entire stories, whereas other types of inquiry (. . .) often extract certain kinds of materials (. . .) from stories for analytic purpose” (p. 180). This approach, therefore, was consistent with the goal of this study, as we aimed to examine not just a certain element of app use, but the multiple roles Blued plays in our participants' lives given their unique generational, relational, and class backgrounds.

A narrative's value lies in its completeness. Therefore, to preserve the integrity of our participants' narratives, instead of breaking them apart and organizing them according to themes, this article presents the narratives of three participants: Little Liang, in his early 20s; Brother Li, in his 40s; and Uncle Zhang, in his 60s.² Our goal was not to make generalizable claims about the Chinese gay population based on these three individuals. We selected them because their life stories exemplify the

different roles Blued plays in specific personal and social circumstances. In our analysis, we contextualized the narratives of each of these three participants within their lives, tracing the connections between their domestication of Blued and the challenges they faced because of their intersectional identities. We supplemented each of the narratives with those of other participants from the same generation, offering affirming and contradictory accounts to enhance the comprehensiveness of our analysis.

Results

Narrative of Little Liang: blued as a bridge, home, and gay capital

Born in a first-tier Chinese city³ in the early 1990s and graduated from a renowned private college in the United States, Little Liang was working for a transnational consultancy when we first interviewed him. Like many people his age, he was his parents' only child, due to the nationwide one-child policy (1979–2015). His father was a manager of a company and his mother was a university professor. From a young age, he knew he was expected to be more successful than his parents. He understood that he must utilize all types of resources he had to achieve his life goals. He chose to study business overseas because he knew that this path would greatly advance his career.

Although being an only child meant that he lacked rapport with siblings, he received emotional and material support from his parents. "I grew up in a family that was full of love," said Little Liang. This familial environment gave him freedom and choice. The literature on Chinese gay youths often portrays them as victims of familial oppression, including pressure to get married (Choi & Luo, 2016). Little Liang's experience was the opposite:

When I was in high school, I came out to my parents (. . .) My mom was unexpectedly calm and accepted me, telling me that no matter what she still loved me. My dad and I were at stalemate for a couple of days (. . .) A week later, he sent me a message about gay health, reminding me to protect myself.

Little Liang's case can be considered an example of social change—some parents of young people like Little Liang belong to the upper middle class, have university degrees, and live in first-tier Chinese cities that embrace diversity and openness. Little Liang undoubtedly enjoyed advantages due to his family background and generation, which formed the backdrop to his domestication of Blued.

Appropriation, the first stage of domestication, involves the acquisition and ownership of technology. It describes the way in which a technology leaves the commodity market and enters our everyday lives, thereby beginning to accumulate its unique social significance that varies between users (Silverstone et al., 1992). Little Liang described his appropriation of Blued as "illegal." He had known of the existence of the app since middle school. He immediately downloaded the app when he got his own smartphone at the beginning of high school. Although Blued banned minors from using the app, there were no mandatory checks, so Little Liang, who was only 15, claimed to be 18-years-old and became an "illegal user." The other two participants from Little Liang's generation first used Blued when they were 16- and 17-years-old, respectively. To them, Blued was, in the words of Little Liang, "a bridge to the gay world." He elaborated, "I started understanding how other gay men looked and how people in this community talked." This finding echoes those of many prior studies that show that teenagers who are isolated from the urban gay culture use the Internet to explore their sexual desire and look for a sense of belonging (Campbell, 2004; Gray, 2009).

Domestication theory stresses the context of technology use (Silverstone et al., 1992). In his early experience with Blued, Little Liang mainly talked to people via the app and did not meet anyone offline. As he explained, this was because he was at a boarding school where he could use his smartphone only at weekends, and he was not yet ready for physical engagement with gay communities. That is, his school life and lack of psychological preparedness made the incorporation of Blued into his everyday life completely virtual.

After Little Liang entered college in the United States, Blued was re-domesticated into his life in a different way. When he moved to the United States, he started using Grindr, but his experience was disappointing. For one thing, he found the functions of Grindr too limiting. There were no live streaming nor discussion boards on Grindr. For another, he sometimes encountered profiles that stated “No Asians,” which he found offensive. His experience echoes those of people of color who face racism in gay digital spaces (Daroya, 2018). Eventually, Little Liang returned to Blued, where he felt at home: “At least it is all Chinese on this platform.” Very quickly, he met a group of gay friends via the app who also came from China. Blued became an important tool for Little Liang to look for friends while studying abroad.

Having incorporated Blued into his social life in the United States, Little Liang continued using the app to make new friends, extend his social networks, and seek potential job opportunities after returning to China. Morris (2018) describes the ability to get into gay social groups and the bestowal of social prestige by leveraging one’s gay identity as “gay capital.” Little Liang clearly exercised his gay capital via Blued. For instance, he once stayed in a five-star hotel during a business trip. He logged onto Blued and found someone staying in the same hotel, so they met up in the hotel’s lounge. “This guy was the vice-president of the Chinese region of a multinational company (. . .) He gave me a lot of career advice and we became very good friends,” said Little Liang. Similarly, our two other younger participants used Blued to build their careers. One, a personal trainer, used Blued to look for clients; another, an Airbnb host, promoted his accommodation on the app. These examples suggest that being gay, for the young generation, is no longer something one must hide (Kong, 2011); instead, it is a ticket to a network of social resources and business opportunities.

The domestication of technology entails conversion, which refers to the influence the technology may have on the interactions between its users (Silverstone et al., 1992). While Blued indeed connected Little Liang with people whom he would not normally have the chance to meet, it also became a zone of conflict with his boyfriend. Little Liang started using Blued when he was single. To him, Blued was part of his everyday life. He explained, “during a work trip in an unfamiliar city, it is normal to meet another gay man for a cup of coffee and chat.” However, Little Liang’s tendency to incorporate Blued into his social life was not shared by his boyfriend, who understood Blued predominantly as a hookup tool. From our interviews with other Blued users, we found that the app has been considered a hookup tool by the Chinese gay communities for many years. His boyfriend, worried that Little Liang was using Blued to hook up, monitored Little Liang via the app. “He knows where I work, so he often logs on [to the app] to check the distance between me and him,” Little Liang complained. “Sometimes when the distance gets further, he will question where I have been.” Their conflict demonstrates that the domestication process entails an interpersonal dimension that complicates the process of technology adoption. When people enter a different relationship status—from single to dating, in the case of Little Liang—their relationship with Blued also changes.

Narrative of Brother Li: concerns about privacy and mobility

Little Liang’s generation came of age after Blued was launched; to them, Blued has always been there. However, for the older generation, the domestication of the app is influenced by their prior experiences of web-based gay digital spaces.

Born in the early 1970s in a second-tier city in western China, Brother Li was the first one in his entire family to get into a university. After he graduated, he returned to his hometown and became a civil servant, making around 10,000 Chinese yuan (approximately US\$1,400 or €1,210) per month.

Brother Li did not have access to the Internet until he started working. Online chatrooms were the earliest form of gay digital space in China (Ho, 2010). Brother Li recalled:

All of us were using online chatrooms, which today's young gay men may not have heard of. Back then, all gay men in the same town were in the same chatroom. Every day, everyone was looking for a partner like crazy.

In a chatroom, there was a constant influx of messages; therefore, whom one could and would meet largely depended on luck. By 2000, matchmaking websites for gay men, such as BF99.com, had emerged. These websites were modeled on matchmaking websites for the heterosexual population, with users filling in their information and using filters to select potential partners. Brother Li said that matchmaking websites gave him greater autonomy: "The functions of chatrooms are too simple (...) [Matchmaking] websites are so much better; you can decide on your own to screen for people you like." Among the various screening criteria, said Brother Li, location was of utmost importance: "Whether looking for a long-term partner or a one-night stand, everyone wants to look for someone close by. [On these websites,] people make their goal clear—they want to meet offline."

The desire for proximity was amplified by the arrival of smartphones and apps like Blued. Proximity, however, was a double-edged sword. While it offered users convenience, it also brought new challenges that required domestication. Brother Li said that he still remembered how excited he was when he first downloaded Blued: "I felt like I was living in a gay world. There were so many like-minded people around me!"

However, the joy Brother Li experienced did not last long. Very quickly, alarm bells rang. "I had not come out yet, so I was so afraid that people around me would discover me. I saw someone only 0.01 km away. Panic and fear immediately replaced my initial excitement, because I didn't know who this nearby person was or whether he would affect [my] life." Living in a conservative society with no legal protection for sexual minorities, many gay men in China hide their sexual identity because they are afraid that their sexuality will become a burden to their family and limit their careers (Kong, 2011). This fear was especially palpable for Brother Li because his job at the government paid better than many others, which meant that the cost of being outed and losing his job was significant. Therefore, he avoided interacting with people who were close to him; instead, he only talked to people who were farther away. He also used the telephone number of his 70-year-old father to register his account on Blued. To Brother Li, these precautionary measures reduced the potential disturbance this "wild" technology might bring to his life.

At the time of our interview, Brother Li was married to a woman. He got married three years after he returned home from college due to pressure from his family and colleagues. "That was to fulfil my parents' desire and fulfil my duty. It was also a disguise to make my colleagues from my work unit think that I was a normal person," he explained. Similar to Little Liang, whose use of Blued became a zone of conflict with his boyfriend, Brother Li faced challenges in using Blued in his married life. According to domestication theory, objectification is the process in which users place and display the technology in a household to express certain values; it is related to where the technology is used (Silverstone et al., 1992). In Brother Li's case, at home he could not openly use Blued. "My phone is my secret," he said. At first, his wife was concerned by his secret texting, thinking that he was having an affair. The quarrel escalated to the point where his wife demanded that Brother Li unlocked his smartphone for her to view. Brother Li did not compromise and smashed his smartphone in front of

her to end the quarrel. “If she found out, this would have ended my marriage, as well as my future,” he explained.

Following that incident, to ensure that his wife would not notice his use of Blued, Brother Li uninstalled the app every day just before coming home and reinstalled it the next day after leaving home. Our interviews with Blued staff members revealed that it is not uncommon for users between 30- to 45-years-old to uninstall and reinstall the app on the same day or within a couple of days. Perhaps Brother Li is typical of this set of users.

However, not every participant we interviewed was able to maintain a boundary between their phone and their wife as strictly as Brother Li did. As another 40-year-old participant commented, “It is hard to keep a secret from the person who sleeps just next to you. Sooner or later, the secret will be revealed.” The wife of this participant found out that he used Blued and eventually divorced him.

Further, Brother Li used Blued mostly when he was on business trips. After he married, his everyday life was confined to his office and his home. The predictability of his movements aided his wife’s surveillance. Work trips, therefore, presented an opportunity for him to explore areas he would not normally visit. However, not every Chinese gay man has a chance to travel. For those who are at the intersection of economic austerity and family obligations, mobility is not an option.

Self-presentation is critical on Blued because users judge each other mainly based on photographs. Wanting to hide his identity, Brother Li did not show his face in photographs on his profile on Blued. He noted that his reluctance to show his face rendered him a “non-marketable product” on the app: “Many people are unwilling to respond to me when they see that I am 40-years-old and have no real photos.” Brother Li stands at the intersection of society-wide heterosexism and community-wide ageism. Because of the former, he was not willing to put up a face photograph; because of the latter, not putting up a face photograph has moved him toward the margins of the margins.

Accordingly, Brother Li developed some strategies to enhance his “value” in this digital environment. First, he replaced his scenery profile photograph with an emoji, which was trendy among young people. From our interviews with other users, we found that accounts using scenery photographs were often perceived as belonging to older users. By removing this kind of photograph from his profile, Brother Li presented himself as a younger user. The second strategy he used was to reposition himself. For a while, Brother Li described himself as a “Warm man, mature, and caring” on his profile. He explained that this was “the weapon of the weak.” Because he could not hide his age in the event of a physical encounter, he chose to present his age in a positive light.

Narrative of Uncle Zhang: from neglected old man to online celebrity

Our third and final detailed narrative comes from Uncle Zhang. Uncle Zhang was born in the early 1950s in a village in northwestern China. His parents were farmers. He started working after finishing primary school. The young Uncle Zhang witnessed the Great Chinese Famine (1959–1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). During his late teenage years, he noticed his difference from other boys: “Everyone was gossiping about which girls were pretty, but I focused on good-looking boys.” In 1978, same-sex acts between men were officially outlawed. The convicted faced punishments that included public shaming and imprisonment. Therefore, Uncle Zhang did not dare explore relationships with men. Under the arrangement of his parents, he married at 18 and very quickly had two children.

In 1982, the state loosened its regulations on citizens’ geographical mobility. For two reasons—to make money for the household and to escape his married life—Uncle Zhang moved to a city and found a job in a restaurant. He told us that his first same-sex experience happened in a public restroom in a park, a space that gay men in that era considered their world (Kong, 2011). Although gay

websites started appearing in China in 2000, Uncle Zhang, who was nearly 50 by then and had only a primary school level education, was not able to join the bandwagon of digital cruising. For him, typing on a computer keyboard was an impossible task. Further, working in a restaurant meant that his salary was too low to afford a computer and left him little spare time to learn how to use it. Uncle Zhang could not enjoy the benefits of the Internet that younger Chinese gay men did; he continued to spend time in parks at nightfall. This is a clear example of the effects of class and generation on access to technology.

In 2008, Uncle Zhang returned to his home village to take care of his aging father. He took a job as a security guard in a nearby town, which was close enough for him to commute every day from his home village, but far enough for him not to run easily into acquaintances from the village. That year, he also bought his first mobile phone, a Nokia with a black and white screen, to communicate with his family members. This phone altered his way of cruising. With the assistance of his son, Uncle Zhang learned to text via his mobile phone. Because of his prior experienced working in cities, he was familiar with the cruising culture of public restrooms. Seizing the opportunity afforded by having a job in another town, he explored the public restrooms there and started texting the phone numbers written next to the erotic messages that he found on the partitions. He told us that, “Those using this method mostly are old men like me. Young people use the Internet or go to bars; they don’t communicate in this way.” The Internet, bars, and other gay venues that emerged along with the economic reform, while offering spaces for younger gay men to socialize, have excluded older gay men and intensified the divide within gay communities (Kong, 2011).

In 2016, Uncle Zhang was in his early 60s. He told us that his wife had already passed away and his two children had moved to the city. He stayed in his home village alone but visited the city occasionally. When our first author asked Uncle Zhang if he knew what BlueD was, he said that one of his friends had helped him install it on his smartphone. He gave it a try, but the experience was not enjoyable. Younger users either ignored his messages or verbally humiliated him, pointing out he was too old on BlueD or asking, “How come you are not ashamed about being old?” The emphasis on self-presentation on BlueD inevitably privileges people with a certain set of intersectional attributes— young and muscular—and systematically discriminates against people like Uncle Zhang.

The narrative so far describes the failure of Uncle Zhang’s domestication of BlueD. Although he appropriated and objectified BlueD, he was not able to incorporate the app into his routine. In spring 2019, things changed. Our first author saw Uncle Zhang on a live stream on BlueD. Wang (2020) describes live streaming as a process through which BlueD exploits its live streamers, turning them into “performative laborers” who generate active data flows for further capitalization. However, in Uncle Zhang’s live stream, he looked anything but exploited. He and four other seniors were wearing suits. One of the members was singing into a microphone, while the others, including Uncle Zhang, were clapping. The app indicated that around 1,000 people were watching the live stream. Comments flooded in, and most were positive: “cheer up!” and “not bad!” Uncle Zhang told us that this was his gay friend’s idea. From the parks he frequented, he had made some friends who were around his age. “One of us was younger [around 50-years-old] and knew [about live streaming], so he always kept telling us that everyone was going to live stream.” At first, Uncle Zhang hesitated because of his previous failed encounters on BlueD. He said to his friend, “This is a youngsters’ thing, how can we jump in?” As the notion of conversion suggests, people’s domestication of technology does not exist in a vacuum but is embedded in a network of social relationships (Silverstone et al., 1992). With encouragement from his friends, Uncle Zhang picked up BlueD again. Because he and his friends were retired, they had plenty of time. The live stream started every day at 8 p.m. and lasted for two hours. They sang, danced, and talked with their audience who were around their age. At some point, nearly

10,000 people were watching their live stream. Uncle Zhang, personally, had more than 50,000 followers on this Blued account. Whereas he made around 1,200 Chinese yuan (approximately US\$170 or €145) per month in his previous job as a security guard, doing live streaming on Blued was earning him around 1,000 yuan per month, which was good for a retired man. Live streaming, unexpectedly, became a channel through which Uncle Zhang deepened his friendships, made money, and became integrated into the digital gay community.

Uncle Zhang's intersectional disadvantages—old age, working-class, technologically inexperienced—lead to failure in his initial domestication of Blued. However, with his friends, he re-domesticated Blued into his retired life, subverting the norms of mainstream gay virtual spaces. As [Berlant and Warner \(1998\)](#) suggest, queer world-making “necessarily includes more people than can be identified” (p. 558). We can see that in the world that Uncle Zhang and his friends constructed, once inferior intersectional positions were transformed into an advantageous resource, elevating the individuals from exclusion and rejection to inclusion and acceptance. Moreover, their presence on Blued also benefitted other older Blued users. The three other participants around Uncle Zhang's age told us that Blued provided them with emotional support in their old age. One person said,

Before there was Blued, I turned the TV on super loud every day, because this made me feel less lonely (. . .) The content on the TV, however, had no relationship with me. But the live streaming on Blued has made me realize that there are so many people like me in the world. Live streaming is like a lot of people talking with me.

Nonetheless, we have to be careful of being overly celebratory. First, a majority of Uncle Zhang's followers were close to his age. This suggests that, instead of Blued being one world for all gay men, it is creating separate worlds divided along generational lines ([Jones & Pugh, 2005](#)). Second, the inclusion of Uncle Zhang was predicated on his underemphasis of his sexuality. Older gay men are stereotypically considered non-sexual ([Simpson, 2015](#)). Therefore, Uncle Zhang's success reinforces this cultural assumption of older gay men's non-sexuality entailed in homonormativity.

Discussion

Through the three detailed narratives, we reveal the multiple roles dating apps play in gay men's lives and show that the domestication of Blued varies with the generational, relational, and class backgrounds of its users. This study contributes to the scholarship on gay men's use of dating apps in three ways.

No one single way to domesticate blued

First, our study shows that users of Blued domesticate the app in distinct ways. Domestication theory stresses the agency of the users and resists making prior assumptions about how they use a technology ([Hynes & Richardson, 2009](#)). The narratives of Little Liang, Brother Li, and Uncle Zhang illustrate the four aspects of domestication. Starting from the initial contact with Blued, they appropriated the app at different life stages. Little Liang downloaded Blued during high school and returned to the app when he was studying at college. Brother Li and Uncle Zhang appropriated Blued much later in their lives.

Once they encountered Blued, they objectified Blued in various ways. Uncle Zhang had no problems in displaying and using the app in front of his friends, who recommended the app to him in the first place. Little Liang considered Blued to be a convenient gadget on his phone, but this created tensions with his boyfriend. Brother Li had to carefully hide the app from his wife by deleting and re-installing it every day.

Further, the ways they incorporated Blued into their lives were dramatically different. The young and urban Little Liang used Blued to exercise his gay capital, expanding his social network. The middle-aged Brother Li expressed ambivalence toward the geo-locative feature of Blued. There were thrills from meeting new men during work trips, but also concerns over privacy. What the older user Uncle Zhang experienced was a metamorphosis in which he, once ignored by younger users on Blued, became an online celebrity.

Finally, at the stage of conversion, using Blued induced jealousy in Little Liang's boyfriend and suspicion in Brother Li's wife, limiting the extent to which they could incorporate Blued into their everyday life. For Uncle Zhang, using Blued to do live streaming brought him gay sociality through interacting with his friends and viewers. Together, these narratives show that the differences between individuals and between the different life stages of the same individual influence the process of domesticating dating apps. The insights provided by the narratives of Brother Li and Uncle Zhang also complement existing studies, which focus on young app users.

Intersection of generation, relationship status, and class

Second, we document the relationship between users' intersectional disadvantages or advantages and their use of technology. The different ways of domesticating Blued are predicated on the personal attributes of the users, the interactions between the users and their peers, and the macro social circumstances. This multi-layered consideration means no two people domesticate a technology in the same manner (Hynes & Richardson, 2009). Our participants, Little Liang, Brother Li, and Uncle Zhang are from different generations, relationship statuses, and classes. Their narratives illustrate the importance of adopting an intersectional lens that considers users' multiple identities and positions when studying dating apps (Shield, 2018, 2019). We elaborate this point below.

In terms of generations, because of the decriminalization and depathologization of homosexuality in China at the turn of the 21st century, gay men born in the 1980s onward are more likely to embrace their sexuality and differences than men in earlier generations, who tend to have internalized homophobia and self-shame (Kong, 2011). Because of this generational difference, the proximity offered by Blued strengthened the gay capital of Little Liang, who is young and out, but marginalized and threatened Brother Li, who is older and still in the closet.

Uncle Zhang is from a generation that is arguably even more homophobic than Brother Li's, but he is more comfortable being an out gay man on Blued. This points to the intersectional influence of generational and relational backgrounds. Relationship statuses matter in the use of dating apps (Møller & Petersen, 2018). Part of Brother Li's concern with using Blued is its impact on his heterosexual marriage. Uncle Zhang's wife has passed away, which relieves him of hiding his sexuality. In this respect, Brother Li is more similar to Little Liang, whose boyfriend also expresses dissatisfaction about his use of Blued, than to Uncle Zhang.

Shield (2018) urges us to "consider how a geo-locative, mobile device might exacerbate not only a user's geographical position, but also the user's socio-economic position" (p. 159). The three narratives also show that class background may exacerbate the disadvantage of being older on Blued. Little Liang, who is not only young but also works in a transnational consultancy in a first-tier city, often takes business trips and stays in five-star hotels. As a result, he is likely to run into business gurus when using Blued. Brother Li, being a civil servant in a smaller city, does not make as much as Little Liang. He does go on business trips, but the places he visits are less developed than those visited by Little Liang. This shapes what kind of people he encounters on Blued. In these contrasting cases, class intersects with age to shape whom each man can interact with on Blued. Uncle Zhang sought

companionship with older viewers by doing what Wang (2020) calls performative labor. But other, richer Blued users can relatively easily find companionship by buying virtual gifts for younger live streamers (Wang, 2019). Therefore, class influences how the interactions on Blued can take place.

Usefulness of narrative-based interviews

Finally, our study demonstrates the usefulness of oral history in studying the meaning and significance of Blued to our participants. Thematic analysis is the dominant methodology in studies of gay men's use of dating apps (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018; Wang, 2019, 2020; Wu & Ward, 2020). It is best used to explore certain aspects of app use. As our goal in this study is to holistically look at the role Blued plays in our participants' everyday life, the oral history method allows our participants to produce domestication narratives that describe how they adjust or maintain their behaviors and attitudes toward the app across an extended period of time. From their narratives, we see how changes in their life circumstances, such as moving to a larger city, getting married, and being rejected, orient them in the emerging dating app culture. We suggest adding narrative-based interviews, alongside other innovative methods, such as the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018) or computational method (Van Berlo & Ranzini, 2018), to the toolkit for studying dating apps.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study contributes to the literature on gay men's use of dating apps by integrating domestication theory and intersectionality theory. By presenting three in-depth narratives of Blued users, supplemented by a few others, we show that Blued plays different roles for people with different generational, relational, and class backgrounds. The two narratives from older Blued users show that the bias toward young users in existing studies may have ignored some fundamental ways in which these apps may influence or be influenced by the users' life circumstances. Future studies may build upon our effort to consider other sets of intersectional attributes in shaping the use of dating apps.

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Note

1. We refer to Blued as a social app because its features go beyond those of a typical Western dating app, such as Grindr and Tinder (see below; Miao & Chan, 2020).
2. These are all pseudonyms. "Little" (*shǎo*, in Chinese) followed by someone's last name is an amicable way to address a man younger than or around same age as oneself. Similarly, "Brother" (*dàgē*) followed by someone's last name is used to address a man older than oneself. "Uncle" (*bó*) following someone's last name is a way to show respect to a man much older than oneself. To further protect our participants' identities, we do not specify their exact age nor the city they were born or were living in at the time of interview.
3. Chinese cities are informally classified into five tiers according to their population and economic performances, with Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen commonly being referred to as first-tier cities (Wong, 2019). There is, however, no official classification from the government.

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