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Revisiting community and media: an affordance analysis of digital media platforms used by gay communities in China

Weishan Miao [1], Lik Sam Chan [2],*

[1]School of Journalism and Communication, Renmin University of China, Mingde Building, 59 Zhongguancun Street, Haidian District, Beijing, China
[2]School of Journalism and Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Room 201, Humanities Building, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong
*Corresponding author: Lik Sam Chan, Email: samchan@cuhk.edu.hk

Abstract

What roles do media play in community building? Based on life story interviews with 72 older gay men living in China, this study traces the rise and fall of four significant digital media platforms used by Chinese gay communities since the late 1990s. We propose the notion of community-based media affordance as an analytical device and show that the four platforms vary in terms of pervasiveness, self-presentation, searchability, visibility, editability, and awareness. This variation in affordances has contributed to "the good, the bad, and the ugly" in Chinese gay communities. Our analysis highlights the specific social, cultural, and political circumstances of the development of these platforms. It also suggests a link between certain community-based media affordances and the platforms' capacity for queer community building. The framework of community-based media affordance can also be used to compare affordances across different media in future studies.

Keywords: gay men, China, community, affordance, life story interview

> I remember, in the most eye-catching location on the website, it said, "When you are tired from walking, you can rest here; when you are happy, you can share with your friends; when you are sad, you can vent here. This is our common family." When I saw these sentences for the first time, I shed tears.
>
> —Brother Li, 56 years old, married to a woman

> We still have a desire for this community, for love. ... Blued is always a temptation. But the reality is cruel. Many people can't bear its real side, such as hookups, HIV infection, and unfaithful relationships, so they uninstall it again. We are always wandering in this cycle of hope and disappointment.
>
> —Lin, 50 years old, single

In the quotations above, Brother Li referred to a website called Huazuihongchen (花醉红尘), which was extremely popular among Chinese gay men in the late 1990s, and Lin expressed his ambivalence toward Blued, China's most prominent gay-oriented mobile app since the early 2010s. Like many Chinese gay men born in the 20th century, Brother Li and Lin have lived their entire lives as closeted gay men. Digital media platforms have played a significant role in their private lives as gay men. Their comments suggest that Huazuihongchen was considered *good* because it provided gay men with a sense of security and validation, whereas Blued reflects the *bad* and *ugly* aspects of the gay community.

This special issue addresses "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly" of social media platforms. Of course, the experiences of men like Brother Li and Lin on social media are too complex to be simply described as good, bad, or ugly. We are mindful of the risk of reproducing the kind of technologically deterministic rhetoric that claims that the Internet produces either a utopia or dystopia for marginalized communities (Baym, 2015). Similar to Kollock and Smith's (1998) analysis of cyberspace, our study does not simply "ask whether online interaction is 'good' or 'bad'" but focuses on "describing and analyzing patterns of online social interaction and organization as they exist" (p. 4). Our study asks the following question: What are the roles of gay-oriented digital media platforms in shaping gay communities in China? Based on life story interviews (Atkinson, 1998) with 72 older gay men, we explore how Chinese gay men make sense of these platforms and to what extent they think that these platforms have shaped the development of Chinese gay communities.

We situate our inquiry in the wider scholarship on community and media. In the sociological canon, "community" is distinguished from "society." According to Tönnies (1887/1957), "community" refers to a collective of people who share a culture or are influenced by the same institutions, whereas "society" is characterized by impersonal and transactional relationships. Therefore, a community encompasses a strong collective identity and a sense of belonging. Media, because of their symbolic capacity in forging shared meanings and identity, are at the center of community building. There have been three waves of studies examining the interplay between community and media (Jankowski, 2002). The first and second waves focused on immigrant communities and place-based communities, respectively; the third wave of scholarship explored Internet-supported virtual communities. The Chinese

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gay communities in this study can be categorized as virtual communities.

This study contributes to media and queer studies in three significant ways. First, most conventional studies in the field of community and media (e.g., Jankowski et al., 1992; Marlowe et al., 2017; Park, 1922) have examined a snapshot of the interrelationship between one medium and one community at a certain moment. Through life story interviews, our study incorporates a historical perspective that traces the succession of gay-oriented digital media platforms in China. This allows for an empirical assessment of the shifting roles of different digital media platforms in queer community building in the country. Second, many queer Internet studies have focused on younger people's experiences (e.g., Cavalcante, 2019; Gray, 2009). Our data were collected from gay men who were above 40 years old. Their views allow us to trace how queer Internet and queer communities have evolved over time. Third, we introduce the concept of affordances to our analysis to attend to the nuanced, complex relationships between media and community building. "Affordances" refers not to the actual outcomes of using a communication technology but rather to the possibilities that are offered by its use (Evans et al., 2017). By rethinking the connection between community and media through the lens of affordances, we can avoid making simplified claims that certain platforms are outright "good" or "bad" for a community.

In what follows, we review research in the field of community and media and highlight studies related to gay communities and the Internet. We then present our understanding of affordances and provide a brief overview of the status of male homosexuality and queer Internet in modern China, against which our results can be interpreted. In the results section, we present a genealogy of four gay-oriented digital media platforms—a website, online chatrooms, a social networking site, and a dating app—that have played dominant roles in Chinese gay communities. Our analysis reveals how our interlocutors characterized these platforms and what influences they thought these platforms had on their communities. We compare these platforms based on their affordances, establishing a comparative framework for future community and media studies.

Literature review

Community media, community-based media, and queer community

Community media are often associated with civil society, nonprofit organizations, and the participation of community members. Howley (2005) referred to community media as media that are run by a specific community and produce content for that community predicated on strong discontent with established mainstream media. Community media's operation is based on "the principles of free expression and participatory democracy," and their aim involves "enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity" (p. 2).

Urban sociologists from the Chicago School pioneered the study of community media among immigrant communities in the United States (Park, 1922). While research following this line of inquiry adopted the classic definition of community media, recent scholars have examined how the commercial press facilitates the assimilation of immigrant communities (Hickerson & Gustafson, 2016). Further, others have extended their inquiry to commercial social media platforms. For instance, focusing on the concept of "digital belongings," Marlowe et al. (2017) studied how students from immigrant families in New Zealand used Facebook and Viber to maintain connections with their families abroad and strengthen their relationships with their local friends.

In these more recent studies, scholars are still interested in the roles media play in promoting community solidarity. However, these studies evidently reflect a departure from the classic definition of community media and include non-grassroots-based and non-locally-oriented media in their inquiries. To differentiate community media in the traditional sense from community media that may not be owned or run by community members, we use the term "community-based media" in this study. Community-based media, according to Bao (2021), "function as active and ongoing social processes in which identities are constructed, communities are forged, and activism is conducted" (p. 36). Based on this conceptualization, it makes sense to ask how the Internet has shaped queer communities. Many digital media platforms are owned by private entities; therefore, calling the platforms that serve queer communities "community media" may not be conceptually accurate. In this study, we refer to these various queer-community-servicing digital media platforms as "community-based media."

As early as the 1990s, scholars had begun to explore how email, a simple Internet tool, allowed teenagers to safely explore their sexuality and write to other gay teens (Silberman, 1999). Gray (2009) analyzed how queer youths living in rural America used the Internet to bypass geographical and age differences and learn about urban queer culture. The anonymous nature of some social media platforms makes them relatively safe spaces where queer youths can come out. For instance, Cavalcante (2019) found that Tumblr's lack of a real-name policy enabled queer youth to explore their sexual orientation with privacy. In contrast to the anonymous accounts on Tumblr, YouTube allows users to articulate their sexual orientation publicly in "coming out" videos (Lovelock, 2019). These videos, often revealing challenges and pathways to self-acceptance, offered queer sexual minority youth advice on how to face their own challenges and negative emotions. Nonetheless, the representations of queer lives and the increasing visibility of queer bodies online (particularly among gay men) may pressure queer people to constantly monitor and surveil themselves (Mowlabocus, 2010).

Scholars have also posited that certain queer ethics are maintained by the members of community-based media platforms. For instance, commenting on Internet relay chats, Campbell (2004) highlighted that the "shared presumptions of both a particular gender and sexual identity, the policing of these presumptions, as well as communal efforts to exclude hostile discourses [have] made these channels hospitable spaces for erotic exploration" (p. 55). In a study of queer online dating culture, Pym et al. (2021) found that queer youths adhered to certain "codes of conduct" (p. 410) in online dating, such as making sure that their behaviors aligned with their self-presentation on their profiles. In addition, they connected only with "nice people"—people whom they deemed to share their queer sensibility and hold similar expectations regarding consistent self-presentation.

In the last decade, dating apps such as Grindr have emerged as innovative and popular platforms for sexual minorities seeking relationships. While the primary concern of many studies on queer dating apps was relationship development

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(Chan, 2018; Corriero & Tong, 2016; Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018), some scholars have also questioned whether queer dating apps can facilitate community building. Gudelunas's (2012) answer to this was not optimistic, finding that gay men's social networking was mainly sexual and dyadic in nature. Miles (2017) noted that only heavy app users considered dating app use beneficial to the reconstruction of gay communities in London. In contrast, Baudinette's (2019) study in Tokyo found that the use of dating apps helped strengthen the feeling of having a gay neighborhood. Moreover, Chan (2021) explored how queer women living in China used the dating apps' live streaming feature to learn about coming out and getting married overseas and to offer free counseling to younger, confused queer women.

Together, these studies demonstrate the crucial roles of digital media platforms in offering information, connection, and stories to queer people, or, in the words of Gieseking et al. (2018), "the radical capacity of digital technology" for queer lives (para. 20). In this study, we incorporate a historical perspective and trace how the different digital media platforms prevalent in different periods evolved with Chinese gay communities. We apply the concept of affordances to different platforms, such as websites and mobile apps, to unpack how gay men perceive these platforms in certain ways—as bringing out the good, the bad, or the ugly in their communities.

Affordances of community-based media

The concept of affordances originally referred to the complementarity of animals and their habitats (Gibson, 1986). Affordances, according to this definition, are not simply the features of animals' physical environment but also how animals perceive these features. The concept offers scholars a third way between technological determinism and an overemphasis on human agency (Hutchby, 2001). Social media offer various affordances. For instance, boyd (2010) identified four affordances of social networking sites: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. Moreover, various other typologies have been developed to label the diverse affordances of media (e.g., Fox & McEwan, 2017; Schrock, 2015). Some recent studies have applied the concept of affordances to explore the interrelationship between digital media platforms and queer communities in China. For instance, Chan (2021) developed the concept of communal connectivity to refer to the affordance of some lesbian-oriented dating apps, which allows lesbians to share information, seek and offer emotional support, and conduct advocacy work for their community. Zhao and Chu (2022) examined the use of a Chinese knowledge-sharing platform by gay men and identified text-sociality, identity reflexivity, and community expandability as three major affordances of the platform for the development of the gay community.

However, these recent studies have posed at least two challenges to affordance scholarship. First, the meanings and categories of affordance articulated by these scholars can vary drastically. Evans et al. (2017) identified 23 different categories of affordances from communication and communication-related journal articles published between 1985 and 2015. They called for a more unified definition of affordances in media and communication studies and suggested three defining characteristics of an affordance. First, affordance should not be confused with a feature of a technology; rather, a technology's feature is its source. In addition, whereas a feature can be described as either absent or present, an affordance exists on a spectrum. Finally, an affordance is not an outcome of using a technology but can lead to multiple outcomes simultaneously, which might be good, bad, and ugly. The latter characteristic demonstrates the theoretical advantage of the concept of affordances in this context, in that technology is considered not as a deterministic drive for a utopia or dystopia but instead as offering the potential for diverse consequences.

The second challenge posed by the recent studies on affordances is that new labels are continuously created to refer to similar affordances, thus creating a lack of consistency. For example, "community expandability," proposed by Zhao and Chu (2022), is akin to "communal connectivity," proposed by Chan (2021). The constant creation of new labels of affordances has made cross-media and cross-study comparisons onerous.

To navigate these challenges in this study, we borrow a list of affordances identified by Rice et al. (2017). Rice et al. (2017) were interested in what they referred to as "organizational media," which included "e-mail, telephone calls, short messages … and external social media for work-related matters" (p. 112). Their analysis of survey data from a media organization led them to identify six organizational media affordances: pervasiveness, self-presentation, searchability, visibility, editability, and awareness. Their study did not assess "each affordance in a one-to-one relation to a specific medium" (Rice et al., 2017, p. 107) but rather considered "an environment of affordances" (Madianou & Miller, 2013, p. 170).

Based on Rice et al. (2017, p. 110), we define community-based media affordances as *the possible outcomes that media users attribute to the use of a medium, given the medium's features, relative to users' needs, and within a community context*. The six community-based media affordances are redefined as follows (Rice et al., 2017, p. 113):

- Pervasiveness: Users can communicate with other community members with ease
- Self-presentation: Users can present a persona to other community members, and their information persists
- Searchability: Users can search for words and images or look for other community members
- Visibility: Users can observe the interactions among other community members
- Editability: Users can edit their information and messages after they have posted them[1]
- Awareness: Users can keep themselves up to date with the recent happenings in the community

We believe that this typology from Rice et al. (2017) provides a useful foundation for studying community-based media affordances for the following reasons. First, both "community-based media" and "organizational media" refer to a media setting that goes beyond one-on-one, interpersonal communication. Therefore, focusing on community-based media affordances draws our attention to the potential influences digital media platforms may have on community building. This affordance approach is more suitable than other theoretical approaches, such as the uses and gratifications approach (see Gudelunas, 2012) which centers on the experiences of individual users. Second, such a typology implies that "affordances are not experienced in isolation, but rather in

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relation to a complex ecology of other tools with other affordances" (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p. 2). Using this framework allows us to examine the interaction between a platform and its users holistically instead of simply zooming into a particular feature of the platform. Third, consistent with Evans et al. (2017), the effects of these six affordances are not deterministic in nature. The affordances can lead to good, bad, or ugly outcomes, contingent on users' interaction with them. Fourth, the proposed affordance labels already have currency in the literature, and applying these labels thus enables easier cross-study comparisons.

Some scholars argue that affordances partially stem from users' imagination and conceptualization (Nagy & Neff, 2015). According to this school of thought, the affordances of the same platform can vary according to users' perceptions, expectations, emotions, and past experiences. We appreciate that this definition of affordance considers the role of users and highlights the indeterminacy of the effects of any technology. Nonetheless, adopting this definition may result in conceptualizing different affordances for different users, making comparisons within and across platforms challenging. Since affordances already allow for emergent outcomes and unexpected uses (Evans et al., 2017), adopting a typology framework in this study balances the need for comparisons and the consideration of emergent outcomes.

Male homosexuality and the queer Internet in modern China

Gay men in China have always faced tremendous cultural and legal pressures in China. There is strong cultural resistance to homosexuality. Confucius believed that a person's life was a continuation of their family bloodlines (Hwang, 1999). Accordingly, same-sex relationships are considered as failing to fulfill the Confucian requirement of filial piety. Until 1978, there was no explicit law against male same-sex activities, but men caught engaging in such activities were punished by the authorities (Davis & Friedman, 2014). In 1978, the government formally criminalized male homosexuality. Furthermore, the 1989 edition of the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders—the Chinese equivalent of the American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—classified homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder. Between the 1960s and 1990s, the lives of gay men in China were thus extremely difficult. Gay men often internalized homophobic attitudes and felt ashamed of their same-sex desire (Kong, 2010), and most of them ended up living heteronormative lives in heterosexual marriages (Miao & Chan, 2021).

However, with China's integration into the world economy in the late 1990s, the government and medical community reversed their stance toward homosexuality. Male homosexuality was decriminalized and depathologized in 1997 and 2001, respectively. Commercial entertainment venues for gay men appeared due to economic reforms, allowing younger gay men to forge connections with each other (Kong, 2010). Soon after China gained access to the Internet in 1994, gay-oriented websites were established. In these early years, state censorship and Internet regulation were loose, allowing gay-oriented websites to thrive. In addition to featuring translated news on queer issues from the West and selling sex toys that were unavailable in physical stores, these websites also carried what Ho (2010) called "comrade literature," which were romantic stories and positive narratives about being a gay man in China.

Right before the 2008 Olympic Games in China, the Chinese national press agency, Xinhua News Agency, publicized a Beijing-based gay website to Western audiences, hoping to demonstrate that Beijing was as liberal as many Western metropolises (Miao & Chan, 2020). Kong (2010) observed that gay men born in China in the 1980s and coming of age in the 2000s embraced their sexual identity to a greater extent than their older counterparts. In 2010, Feizan, a gay-oriented social networking site, was launched, positioning itself in the market as a non-sexual networking site that people would feel comfortable accessing even in their offices. According to Wei (2020), Feizan was "the first well designed and fully functional social networking service for Chinese gay men" (p. 104).

Nonetheless, it would be naıve to describe that the social and political status of China's gay men progressed linearly. In the 2017 Chinese General Social Survey, around half of the respondents regarded homosexual relations as "always wrong" (Liang et al., 2022). Further, because traditional Chinese parents expect their children to marry, some gay men engage in "cooperative marriage" with lesbians (Choi & Luo, 2016). Politically, the authorities have adopted an attitude of intolerance toward homosexuality since 2013. In 2016, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television banned content depicting same-sex relationships from television. Further, in 2017, same-sex relationships were banned from online videos. Homosexuality, according to the authorities, belongs to the category of "abnormal sexual behaviors," such as incest and sexual violence (Ellis-Petersen, 2016; Wang, 2017).

Despite the fluctuating stances of the government and the society toward homosexuality, various mobile apps were created for the gay male community in the 2010s. These apps, such as Blued and Aloha (Miao & Chan, 2020; Wang, 2020; Wu & Trottier, 2021), continue servicing thousands of gay men, both closeted and out, in China. From websites to mobile apps, the Chinese queer Internet has evolved. In this context, we ask the following question: What roles have gay-oriented Internet platforms played in shaping gay communities in China?

Method

Research design overview

This article is based on life story interviews (Atkinson, 1998) with 72 self-identifying gay men living in China conducted between May 2016 and November 2020. A life story "is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it" (Atkinson, 1998, p. 8). Life story interviews are conducive to the revealing of interlocutors' memories of past episodes and incidents. For instance, Cavalcante (2016) used life story interviews to closely examine how a transwoman accessed different digital media platforms across her lifetime. In this study, we focused on our interlocutors' memories of the digital media platforms of which they were once users. In sharing their life stories with us, the interlocutors were able to connect their personal lives, such as their realization of their sexuality or first falling in love with another man, with the evolution of online gay scenes and community dynamics.

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Interlocutors recruitment and demographics

Our first author recruited our interlocutors from various physical queer spaces, such as the Beijing LGBT Center and gay bars in Xi'an, via Blued, through local and regional queer non-governmental organizations, and through referral (i.e., snowballing). The inclusion criteria were (a) being or having been an active user of any Chinese online platform for gay men and (b) being 40 years old or above. Older gay men were selected because they were more likely to have experienced the Internet from the 1990s, thus allowing us to trace the genealogy of the various gay online platforms in the country. As we show below, some of these platforms were no longer in operation at the time of writing. It is only through the memories of our interlocutors that we can reconstruct the digital scenes and community dynamics of earlier times.

Our interlocutors were aged between 40 and 66 at the time of their interviews: 16 were born in the 1950s, 26 in the 1960s, and 30 in the 1970s. Forty-seven of the interlocutors were married to a woman at the time of the interview, 18 were single, and 7 were divorced. Only 8 were out, with the rest closeted. They had various residential backgrounds: 35 lived in cities, 26 in towns, and 11 in villages.[2] All of them were Han Chinese. In terms of education level, 14 had only completed primary school, 37 had completed secondary school, and 21 held a college degree or above (including two with doctorates). The sample thus covered a diverse population.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected by our first author. All of the interlocutors were informed about the scope of this study and how their data were to be used. All of them provided either written or verbal consent to participate. Life story interviews often take multiple rounds of interviews. Among our 72 interlocutors, 45 were interviewed twice or above (for one particular case, six interviews were conducted). Each interview lasted between 35 min and 2 hr. The average length of the life story interview for one interlocutor was 56 min. Our first author recorded the interviews with the consent of our interlocutors. Because of their occupations, several interlocutors declined to be recorded; in these cases, our first author jotted extensive notes during the interviews.

Our first author began each interview by inviting our interlocutors to recall when they started using the Internet and what kind of online platforms they had used. They were invited to comment on the social dynamics they perceived on these platforms and the online communities they had been in contact with through these platforms. As an open-ended process, life story interviews "give people the opportunity to tell their story the way they choose to tell it" (Atkinson, 1998, p. 9), rather than extracting facts from interlocutors. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article. We also interviewed the founders of the platforms to better understand their features and governance and included their remarks whenever appropriate.

We used a two-cycle coding process (Miles et al., 2014) with a constant comparative procedure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We first identified the major digital media platforms our interlocutors had used. Then, we paid attention to which affordances our interlocutors' experiences were best related to. Two authors coded the data separately and then came together to discuss their observations.

Four distinct digital media platforms and eras emerged from the data: a website, Huazuihongchen (1998–2003), mentioned by 19 interlocutors; localized online chatrooms (the early 2000s–2009), mentioned by 40 interlocutors; a social networking site, Feizan (2010–2017), mentioned by 31 interlocutors; and a dating app, Blued (2012–present), mentioned by 62 interlocutors. In the results below, we describe how the Chinese gay men we interviewed evaluated each of these platforms in relation to gay community building. In analyzing each platform, we pinpoint the relevant community-based media affordances at play. At the end of the results section, we compare these platforms across the six affordances.

Results

Promise of a family: Huazuihongchen

On August 16, 1998, a website called Huazuihongchen (花醉红尘) was founded as China's first gay website. The name literally means "flower drunk with red dust," where "red dust" refers to the prosperity of a town. With the introduction of the Internet in China in 1994 and the decriminalization of male homosexuality in 1997, the website envisioned itself as a prosperous space for gay socializing.

According to our interlocutors, many gay websites in the 1990s relied on the metaphor of *jiá* (family, 家). *Jiá* not only refers to a physical dwelling but also occupies a central role in Chinese morality: it is where people should place their primary responsibility and where they find acceptance. The quotation from Brother Li cited in the introduction of this article expresses the sense of comfort that gay men felt in visiting the website. Many of our interlocutors told us that before they had access to the Internet, they thought they were the only gay men in the world. The beautiful vision of *jiá* offered by Huzuihongchen became a promise that touched these lonely souls.

Based on the recollections of our interlocutors, the architecture of Huazuihongchen comprised four parts. First, there was news. The earliest gay websites in China shared translated news from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other countries and regions. The news covered various topics, including celebrity gossip, scientific facts regarding sexuality, and foreign governments' policies toward sexual minorities, thus affording awareness. Second, there was a love story column, or "comrade literature" (Ho, 2009). Uncle Ying (60 years old, married) showed us a diary entry in which he recorded how the column characterized itself: "Red dust has love, and time passes like songs. Let us read their life stories and share everyone's joy and love." Reading these stories allowed Teacher Lau (55 years old, single) to recognize that "There are so many people like me in this world, who share the same kind of love and suffer the same type of pain. This kind of emotion is shared by everyone in this *jiá*." In this way, storytelling forged an affective connection between individual visitors and the larger gay community in China (Papacharissi, 2014).

The third part of the architecture of Huazuihongchen was an online chatroom. Online chatrooms afford visibility, allowing site visitors to chat with each other. Huazuihongchen had only one giant public chatroom, in which everyone's messages were visible. One person would initiate a chat topic, and others would reply. According to Brother Meng (born in the 1970s, married), "To be able to see others chatting to each other offered me a sense of participation." Our interlocutors indicated that, partly because they were cautious about

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speaking publicly online and partly because they cherished the opportunity to chat, sex was rarely mentioned. The image that Huazuihongchen was everyone's *jiá* was so rooted in users' minds that everyone actively maintained the purity of this space.

Finally, there were personal ads. These spaces afford self-presentation. Back then, personal ads relied heavily on text. When a viewer saw a suitable ad, he would send a message to the ad creator through the site's private messaging feature. Wang (50 years old, divorced) described this as "checking emails every day." Personal ads on the website might connect people living very far away; therefore, rather than hooking up or meeting offline, genuine conversations could happen between two strangers.

In short, our interlocutors mostly agreed that Huazuihongchen fulfilled what a *jiá* should provide—acceptance of their lonely souls. Everyone tried to safeguard the good brought by the website to their community. Nonetheless, the website also reinforced certain structural inequalities. First, as Uncle Guo (65 years old, married), who was living in a small town, asked, "Whose *jiá* is this?" In 1998, there were only 2.1 million Internet users in China (Du, 1999). Those who could visit Huazuihongchen were urban, educated, middle- to upper-class gay men; for lower-class people like Uncle Guo, the Internet was only a high-tech product they had heard about on television. Second, this gay *jiá* perpetuated homonormativity. Gao (56 years old, single) recalled, "I remember that at that time, in the chatroom, people were discussing what the best life was for Chinese gay men. … What we wanted was just to be an ordinary person and to live a normal and happy life like an ordinary heterosexual couple." This blueprint for future gay lives is precisely what Duggan (2003) called homonormativity: instead of questioning and challenging the legitimacy of heterosexuality, the community in Huazuihongchen attempted to follow and maintain its presuppositions.

In October 2003, frequent attacks by unknown hackers forced Huazuihongchen to shut down.

Circle of temptation: localized gay online chatrooms

In the first decade of the 2000s, gay online chatrooms became the dominant digital platforms for Chinese gay men. The chatrooms were localized, with many Chinese cities, such as Beijing, Chongqin, and Xi'an, having their own. The proximity of the users of these chatrooms, who lived in the same city or province, encouraged offline eroticism.

In stark contrast with the use of *jiá* to describe gay websites from the previous era, our interlocutors described these gay chatrooms as "bathhouses" and "meat markets." These chatrooms often had sexually suggestive names, such as "Late Night Passion" and "The Temptation of Boys," and featured topless and seductive male models on the sites. Switching from *jiá*, gay men began calling their gay community *quānzi* (圈子). Literally meaning a circle, *quānzi* refers to a group based on certain characteristics, such as a shared interest, age range, occupation, or place of residence. Here, we explore how the various affordances of online chatrooms shaped the Chinese gay community in those years.

First, gay chatrooms were searchable by Internet search engines. As the gay chatrooms were highly localized, users would look for the chatrooms of their own city; otherwise, they risked being ignored in the chatroom. Second, many chatrooms required no phone or email authentication. Anyone could register an account to enter the chatroom and create their preferred persona online. Third, there was a public chatting space where everyone's messages were visible, similar to the chatroom in Huazuihongchen described above. Each message would occupy a line on the screen, and new messages would push the older messages off the screen. A typical message looked like this: "25 170 50, light skin, hairless, thong, …, looking for leather shoes, black socks, suit pants, 1, no mess" (Cui, 2017, p. 146, our translation). Our interlocutors lamented that no actual chats could be carried out in these chatrooms; people only listed their sexualized features, such as 25 (years old), 170 (cm), 50 (kg), and 1 (top). People could reply in the public chatroom or send a private message to others by clicking their alias shown on the screen.

The searchability of the localized chatrooms, the self-presentation, and the visibility of other messages afforded quick sexual networking. Describing the process of looking for a sexual partner, Li (49 years old, married) said, "you either keep pasting your message repeatedly … or send a private message to someone when you see a preference that fits you." What usually followed would be an exchange of photos on other messaging platforms. A hookup could be arranged in as little as 3 min, according to Li.

Our interlocutors held diverse opinions about this highly sexualized *quānzi*. Some saw its good side, regarding it as a testing ground for their expression of desire and sexual pleasure. As Brother Liu (41 years old, single) said, "Seeing so many people here [in the chatroom] looking for hookups, I realized that sex was not something to be ashamed of." The chatrooms facilitated the development of a new sexual moral order in which one has complete ownership of one's own body. Brother San (65 years old, single), who enjoyed group sex, said, "I have the right to enjoy the pleasure brought by sex, and it is nobody else's business."

More interlocutors, however, noticed the bad and ugly aspects of the chatrooms. The term *quānzi* was used by our interlocutors as a rhetorical device to distance themselves from the negative aspects of the gay community. For example, our interlocutors would say "people in this *quānzi*" when referring to hookups, drug use, or crime in the community, and would say "This *quānzi* is very messy … I don't mingle with it." To our interlocutors, the emphasis on sex in the chatrooms undermined the search for love and intimacy. As Lao Wang (born in the 1950s, married) put it, "How can this design facilitate chatting, communicating? Even if you send a sincere message looking for friends, it will quickly be buried by these sex-seeking messages." Others also pointed out that this hookup culture privileged certain body types; older, unfit, and feminine bodies were marginalized.

Despite these bad and ugly aspects, people still visited these gay chatrooms. They did so not because they wanted to, but because they had no other choices. Zhang (58 years old, married) said, "[Gay chatrooms] are like a dock, a transit airport … No matter where you go, no matter what you are looking for, you must start from here." As such, those who did not enjoy the erotic opportunities afforded by online chatrooms maintained a hope that, if they were lucky, they would find someone with whom they could hold a genuine conversation.

In 2009, most gay chatrooms were shut down by the government on the grounds of their pornographic content.

Queer sociality: Feizan, or "the gay Facebook"

Feizan was founded in 2010. In our personal interview, Ling Jueding, the site's founder described it as a social networking

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site, not a sexual networking site. He emphasized that gay men had rich and interesting lives beyond merely talking about love and sex. As Wei (2020) argued, Feizan "fulfills queer people's mobilized desire to break away from the (internalized) shame and stigma in search of a more positive queer community and social presence" (p. 105).

To build a gay community, Feizan offered three major community-building features: individual pages, diaries, and columns. First of all, the architecture of the site was modeled on Facebook, with each user establishing their own Facebook-like homepage. Users could upload photos, write and rewrite extended posts (known as diaries), and follow others. Da Liu (41 years old, divorced) told us that on gay websites like Huazuihongchen and in gay chatrooms, people only provided an alias and knew very little about each other. Although these public chatrooms with their non-stop influx of messages could be exciting to new users, they became boring after a while. Da Liu believed that Feizan had given him his own domain in the online gay space for the first time. He could edit his page as if decorating his home. Zhan Ming (born in the 1970s, married) described Feizan as a "cozy nest" because he could edit his home page according to his preference, such as changing the color of the page, adding background music, or hiding the page from some people.

With the durability of the pages, relationships among Feizan users gradually normalized. Even after the site ceased to operate, users could still log onto the site and revisit their profile and what they had posted. Brother Liu commented, "At least there is a way to make lasting memories on [Feizan]. But every time you go in the chat room or Blued, it's always new people, new information, and it feels like nothing can settle down."

Of these individualized elements, diaries took a primary role. There was a centralized interface through which users could read the diary entries written by their connections or promoted by the administrators. This mechanism encouraged users to express themselves in writing. Liang (47 years old, single) said that everyone would make an effort in writing their diaries: "It felt good. There was a process of getting to know someone, and intimacy was cultivated gradually." He compared today's dating apps to eating fast food and Feizan to "drinking tea," elaborating that "the purpose of drinking tea is not only to quench our thirst but also to enjoy conversing with others while taking the tea."

Feizan also set up various columns catering to different interests or activities; these included "Rental with Gay Friends," "Movie Watching," "Fitness Together," "Travel Companions," and "Second-hand Store." The site invited writers with particular expertise, such as psychologists, to contribute to its columns. Feizan also actively cooperated with various non-governmental organizations, magazines, bars, and cafes to hold concerts, film screenings, reading clubs, drama workshops, and even mountain climbing meetups. As a result, many of our interlocutors regarded Feizan as the most comprehensive gay digital media platform that they had ever used.

These three features collectively offered self-presentation (one could set up a homepage), editability (one could edit their homepage and posts), searchability (one could look for interesting diaries), visibility (one could view comments on others' diaries), and awareness (one could be informed about upcoming happenings in the columns). These affordances facilitate community building rather than simply dyadic exchange.

The good brought by Feizan to the gay community was, however, limited. Uncle Guo's question of to whom Huzuihongchen was *jiá* can also be applied to Feizan. Feizan advertised itself as a "high-quality gay social network" and formed "gated communities" by serving only urban middle-class gay men (Wei, 2020). Activities like writing a touching diary, going to the gym a few times a week, and organizing overseas trips were not usually open to poorer men, older men, or more marginalized men living in the countryside. As Qiang (51 years old, married), an assembly line worker in Shenzhen, said, "I've used Feizan … but that's their world, not a place people like us should stay."

On May 7, 2013, Ling Jueding founded Zank, a location-based mobile app, after which Feizan gradually fell out of favor. In 2017, the government banned Zank on the grounds of its pornographic content. In the same year, Feizan ceased operation.

Just a business: the era of Blued

In 2012, Blued, a mobile social app tailored for gay men, was founded by Ma Baoli (often known as Geng Le), a gay man who also runs a gay-oriented forum since 2000.[3] Often referred to as China's Grindr, Blued had 54 million users worldwide as of November 2020 ("China's largest gay dating app," 2020). Similar to Grindr, Blued uses GPS to locate its users and displays them according to their distance. The app affords self-presentation, with users prompted to upload photos and fill out information such as age, height, weight, and sexual preferences on their profile; editability, with users able to change their profile information anytime; searchability, with users able to find people nearby, as highlighted by its earliest promotional slogan "He's by your side" (他在你身边); and pervasiveness, through its built-in instant messaging feature, which allows Blued users to send messages and photos to any other user. With these affordances, users envision Blued as providing efficient connections, as captured by Sun (41 years old, single): "On Blued you can say 'hello' to a hundred people in a day, and, within a week, you can meet people that would have taken you ten years to meet in the past."

However, most of our interlocutors expressed disappointment with the form of these connections. Some pointed out that Blued stresses the importance of distance, appearance, and sexual attractiveness; therefore, average-looking and older men, and those living in remote areas, are discriminated against. Uncle Zhou (42 years old, married) would edit his age and height on his profile and adopt a name that appealed to the younger men. Qian (49 years old, married) said that Blued users are less patient, noting that some users would write "Don't say 'hi' if you are three km away or more" on their profiles and request others' photographs before engaging in any conversation. Qian elaborated that "In the past [on Feizan], we talked for a long time, and we gradually got to know each other's characters or talents. Blued is like bringing us back to the era of chatrooms, or even worse than that."

Some interlocutors said that the difficulty of connecting with other gay men in the past meant that they treasured every connection, but the ease of downloading Blued and meeting different people today means that users no longer cherish these opportunities. As Brother Niu (born in the 1970s, single) lamented,

> In the past, on Feizan, I could spend an afternoon writing my diary or slowly browsing others' spaces [pages]. But on

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mobile phones, we look at things at a glance or swipe the screen quickly to finish reading them. We don't have the patience to read line by line.

Further, because sending private messages to others is very convenient on Blued, the platform offers less visibility. Uncle Hui (born in the 1950s, married) said, "There is a lot of people on Blued, but everyone is sending messages privately. Every interaction is just one-on-one, and it does not create a collective feeling."

Another function of Blued is live streaming. On Blued, any user can apply to become a live streamer, and any user can freely enter and exit another user's live streaming performances. The platform not only allows viewers to send gifts to their favorite live streamers but also publicizes the value of the gifts that live streamers have received, as a way to encourage competition among streamers. Blued takes a certain margin from these gifts as revenue. This highly competitive and commercial atmosphere has turned live streamers into "performative labor" (Wang, 2020) as they try to satisfy viewers' desires for sex and intimacy.

Most of our interlocutors expressed their dissatisfaction with Blued. Some complained that live streaming on the app has created an unhealthy, money-oriented performing culture. Others described Blued as a money-making tool. On July 2020, the mother company of Blued, BlueCity Holdings, was listed on Nasdaq, becoming "the first publicly listed LGBTQ+-focused social network" (O'Neill, 2021, paragraph 1). In our personal interview with Ma Baoli, the founder of Blued, he emphasized that Blued is a business and its ultimate goal is to generate profit. With this vision in mind, Blued treats gay men as potential customers. Therefore, many of its features, and thus affordances, come with a price tag. For instance, users can pay a premium to hide their locations or to make their accounts easier for others to find.

In April 2022, Blued's stock price fell to USD5.23, from an initial price of USD20.46 in 2020. Four months later, it was delisted from Nasdaq, followed by Ma Baoli's stepping down as the CEO without naming a successor (Feng, 2022). The privatization of the company and Ma's departure may hint at the challenges of operating a digital media platform for gay men in China (Feng, 2022).

Comparing affordances across platforms

In accordance with the argument of Evan et al. (2017) that an affordance exists on a spectrum, we compare the four digital media platforms in terms of the six community-based media affordances (Table 1).

Regarding self-presentation, Huazuihongchen had a section for personal ads, in which users could provide a written description of themselves. These ads stayed on the platform for a certain period. On Feizan and Blued, users could upload their photographs and videos, thus enjoying a greater level of self-presentation. Furthermore, users' self-presentation persisted until they deleted their account. Although Feizan is no longer operating, users' profiles are still accessible by logging onto the platform. On localized gay chatrooms, users could only appear as usernames, which limited the extent of their self-presentation.

Regarding searchability, Huazuihongchen did not allow users to search for other gay men. It was possible for a user in a localized gay chatroom to search and communicate with a particular person if they were in the chatroom at the same time. However, the extent of this searchability was incomparably smaller than that of Feizan, on which users could extend their reach through various interest groups, and to that of Blued, on which users can search for other gay men located nearby.

In terms of pervasiveness, on Huazuihongchen and localized chatrooms, it was easy for users to engage in a conversation with the entire group. Localized chatrooms further allowed one-on-one communication. On Feizan and Blued, it became even easier for any user to send a message to any other user. As Blued works on mobile phones, users can log onto the platform anywhere and at any time. The other three platforms were popular at a time when people accessed the Internet only on desktop computers, which limited the convenience of using the platform and communicating with other users.

Visibility refers to the extent to which a user can observe the interactions among other users. In Huazuihongchen's giant chatroom, localized gay chatrooms, and the discussion sections of Feizan, it was easy for any user to look at other users' interactions. As expressed by one of our interlocutors, even merely watching others talking could generate a sense of community. On Blued, however, interactions are mainly between two users, therefore offering limited visibility.

Editability refers to the extent to which users can edit their information and messages after posting them. In Huazuihongchen, users had no way to edit their messages once they posted them. They could not alter their usernames after registration. Therefore, this platform offered very low editability. Localized gay chatrooms allowed more but still very limited editability because it only let users edit their username and the font type. Feizan and Blued, in contrast, allowed users like Zhanming and Uncle Zhou to edit their profiles as often as they wished. Therefore, these two platforms had high editability.

Finally, by sharing much LGBT-related news and information, Huazuihongchen and Feizan offered high awareness, whereas localized gay chatrooms did not offer much community news to their users, and this is also true of Blued (except that it provides HIV prevention messages to its users, Miao & Chan, 2020).

Table 1. Comparison of community-based media affordances across four digital media platforms

	Website: Huazuihongchen	Localized gay chatrooms	Social networking site: Feizan	Dating app: Blued
Self-presentation	Medium	Low	High	High
Searchability	Low	Medium	High	High
Pervasiveness	Low	Medium	Medium	High
Visibility	High	High	High	Low
Editability	Low	Medium	High	High
Awareness	High	Low	High	Medium

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Discussion

In sharing their life stories, our interlocutors revealed how they evaluated the four gay digital media platforms and to what extent they attributed the phenomena they observed in gay communities to these platforms. In the following section, we discuss our contribution to the scholarship on community and media and the usefulness of our affordance approach.

Specificity of community and community-based media

Research on the relationships between community and media has often focused on a single medium at a certain moment (Jankowski et al., 1992; Marlowe et al., 2017; Park, 1922). Our genealogy of gay digital media platforms illustrates the historical succession of different community media for a certain community. Specifically, we document the rise and fall of some of the most significant digital media platforms for Chinese gay men. The development of community-based media, our analysis reveals, must be contextualized in specific cultural, social, and political environments.

Our interlocutors expressed nostalgia for Huazuihongchen and Feizan, recalling how these platforms offered them gay-related information, personal stories, and genuine connections for the flourishing of their communities (Vorderer, 2016). The founding of Huazuihongchen followed the decriminalization and depathologization of homosexuality in the 1990s. Chinese gay men considered Huazuihongchen analogous to a family and actively safeguarded the purity of the open chat room by excluding sex-related conversations. This act of policing would be criticized by Warner (2000) as normalizing queer lives. Nonetheless, considering the social context of 1990s China, with many gay men married to straight women, a space for emotional support was a more urgent need than a space of erotic exploration. As Brother Li demonstrated, gay men were touched by the mere presence of a website dedicated to them.

Feizan could be considered an upgraded version of Huazuihongchen. Whereas the information posted on Huazuihongchen was posted and curated by the site administrators, Feizan was a social networking site where every user could post their own content. As boyd (2011) highlighted, social networking sites can "shape networked publics and people's participation" (p. 46). The platform, which connected gay men and drew them together, also actively bridged the online world with offline events.

Nonetheless, the cyberattack on Huazuihongchen and the prosecution of Feizan's sister app Zank (which led to Feizan ceasing to operate) marked the fall of these vibrant gay online communities. Although the origin of the hackers against Huazuihongchen cannot be traced, it is clear that the authorities managed to curb online gay communities by citing pornography concerns. We can never ascertain whether concern over pornography was the actual reason for banning Zank, but this case does illustrate the struggles that gay-themed digital media platforms face while trying to operate.

Since 2020, Chinese LGBT organizations have been severely affected. Shanghai Pride, launched in 2009, abruptly announced its shutdown in August 2020 (Jiang, 2020). In July 2021, the WeChat accounts of more than a dozen queer student organizations from prominent Chinese universities were shut down permanently (Zhang, 2021). The public visibility of queer communities appears to be an issue. It might be due to such a difficult operating environment that Blued has positioned itself not as a gay community media but as a business, as exemplified by its going public on the stock market. Drawing on Molotch's (2003) idea of "lash-up," Chan (2021) argued that the rise of dating apps in China was underlain by China's economic integration into global capitalism from the 1980s. Blued's management adopts a business logic for every aspect of the platform, such as generating profit from live streaming, charging a premium for additional features, and constantly reviewing and launching value-added services. The outcome of these tactics is a group of gay male consumers connected on a dyadic basis without a gay community. Yet, at the time of writing, we learned that Blued went private and its CEO stepped down without naming a successor. Commentators suggested that these changes reflected the state's increasingly tightened regulations on digital media platforms, particularly those related to queer communities (Feng, 2022).

In short, our analysis reveals that a community and its media evolve and sometimes struggle together. Such an analysis must be contextualized in specific cultural, social, and political environments. Without considering the harsh realities and strict regulations that gay men and gay organizations have faced in China, we might mistake the commercialization of a community-based medium such as Blued for an outright betrayal of its community members. Disidentifying themselves with gay community building may be their only strategy to stay in operation.

Usefulness of the affordance approach

Our study's second contribution to existing scholarship is the use of the affordance framework. To eschew the conclusion that certain media are deterministically good or bad for a community, we employ the concept of affordances in our analysis. We develop the idea of community-based media affordances and define pervasiveness, self-presentation, searchability, visibility, editability, and awareness as the six major affordances of community-based media. We demonstrate that the four gay digital media platforms vary in terms of these six affordances.

One theoretical advantage of the concept of affordance is that it does not determine consequences (Evans et al., 2017). An affordance describes a possibility resulting from the design and features of an object, but whether and how this possibility is actualized depends on how the object is used. For instance, Fox and Moreland (2015) highlighted that the visibility of Facebook becomes a stressor if inappropriate comments and photos are visible to all. Regarding lesbian-oriented mobile apps, Chan (2021) warned that community connectivity also places their users back into a heteronormative environment in which traditional gender roles are reified. Our analysis shows that the six affordances we identified can also bring forth the good, bad, and ugly aspects of gay communities. On platforms affording high self-presentation, such as Blued, older and less attractive gay men are excluded from the community because they lack the sexual capital sought by younger gay men. On platforms affording high searchability and pervasiveness, such as localized gay chatrooms and Blued, fast-food-like hookup culture is cultivated. On platforms affording high awareness and visibility, certain community norms are easily maintained; in the case of Huazuihongchen, this was a model based on heterosexual marriages.

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From our data, it is not difficult to notice that our interlocutors were fond of Huazuihongchen, describing it as their family. Their attachment to the website, no doubt, reflects a historical period when they were relatively younger and when China had just decriminalized male homosexuality.[4] Rofel (2007) argued that what accompanied China's opening up in the 1980s was the Chinese people learning to become cosmopolitans. With more people, including gay men, coming from Europe and North America to China, the emergent gay scenes in urban China were "decidedly transnational" (p. 86). Huazuihongchen, at this historical moment, offered foreign news about sexual minorities, both fulfilling and feeding Chinese gay men's curiosity.

Nonetheless, out of the four gay Internet and social platforms we identified, our interlocutors reserved the highest regard for Feizan, which was not the first gay platform or the last platform they encountered. This suggests an absence of a definite correlation between gay men's preference for a particular platform and the age they started using it.

So, how can we explain our interlocutors' preference for Feizan? The varying affordances across the four platforms may offer an explanation. According to Table 1, Feizan was a platform with high community-based media affordances. Specifically, it had high self-presentation and editability (enabling users to express themselves), high searchability (enabling users to look for others), high visibility (enabling users to observe the interactions of others), and high awareness (enabling users to learn about the events and activities in the community). These affordances enabled Feizan users to develop a sense of belonging and affiliation with the community. Huazuihongchen, in contrast, had a medium level of self-presentation and high levels of visibility and awareness; it was also favored by our interlocutors because it generated the feeling of a family. This implies that having self-presentation, visibility, and awareness together is necessary for a digital media platform to constitute a community.

In short, the lens of affordances allows us to rethink the connection between community and media in a more nuanced manner. Prior research can also be reinterpreted through this framework. For example, print-based media outlets, such as the immigrant press, offer awareness but little visibility, self-presentation, searchability, or pervasiveness (Hickerson & Gustafson, 2016); a Facebook page set up for immigrants offers greater visibility and awareness (Marlowe et al., 2017). The insight derived from this study also explains how platforms such as Reddit (a forum), Zhihu (a question-and-answer site), and Tumblr (a social networking site)—all providing self-presentation, visibility, and awareness—can cultivate a sense of community for queer communities (Cavalcante, 2019; Triggs et al., 2021; Wang & Zhou, 2022). Further research in community and media can evaluate the extent to which community media offer certain affordances and assess their potential influences—good, bad, or ugly—on the community.

Conclusion

The roles gay community-based media platforms play in gay community building in China are complicated. Our interlocutors expressed mixed feelings toward these platforms. They had fond memories of Huazuihongchen, the *jiá* where they felt included and accepted as gay men. However, they acknowledged its classism and homonormativity. They commented on the highly sexualized nature of localized gay chatrooms but kept the hope for genuine conversations. Speaking of Feizan, the "Gay Facebook," our interlocutors applauded its community-building features, which allowed them to forge connections with the community. Nonetheless, they also noted classism on it. Finally, they all agreed that Blued offered unprecedented convenience to locate gay men nearby but expressed strong dissatisfaction with the app's profit-driven initiative. With the uncertain future of Blued, whether a new platform will be created deserves continuous attention.

Through this study, we show that the development of community-based media is highly contextual. A community and its media co-evolve and sometimes struggle together. Evaluation of such kind of media must consider how they react to the larger social, cultural, and political environment. Using the concept of affordances, we also illustrate how digital media platforms simultaneously can contribute to "the good, the bad, and the ugly" in a community. Our analysis suggests that a platform with high levels of community-based media affordances may provide a better space to cultivate a community. Future research on community and media can consider using the typology of community-based media affordances for comparative and evaluative purposes.

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Notes

1. In Rice et al. (2017), editability not only refers to the capacity to edit one's own messages but also includes editing messages or documents created by others. This makes sense in an organizational setting; e.g., Google Docs allows different people to edit a document collaboratively. However, this aspect of editability is less relevant to the context of community-based media.
2. Cities, towns, and villages vary in terms of their population and development. Both cities and towns are commonly referred to as urban areas, while villages are considered rural areas.
3. See Danlan.org.
4. We thank one of our reviewers for raising the issues regarding age and social contexts.

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