Online Dating Beyond Dating Apps:
An Exploration of Self-Presentation of Chinese Gay Men Dating on Zhihu

LONGXUAN ZHAO[1]
East China Normal University, China

JIACHENG LIU
The Pennsylvania State University, USA

ZHANGHAO LI
Beijing Normal University, China

This study uses mixed methods to explore how and why Chinese gay men disclose themselves for dating purposes on Zhihu, a Chinese question-answering platform accessible to all. Through a content analysis (N = 413), we found a notably content-rich self-presentation in gay men users' answers. In considering the potential stigma and threats toward gay men in China, we then conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 gay men who use Zhihu for dating to better understand this counterintuitive phenomenon. Three themes are identified: stratified privacy concerns, separating ideal audiences, and quantity matters. The findings suggest the emergence of a polymedia environment of online dating beyond dating apps and, through these Chinese gay men's dating practices, an alternative queer space has formed on an open platform. Unlike the more secluded queer spaces shaped by gay men's dating apps, the presence of queer spaces on Zhihu exhibits the potential of challenging heteronormativity.

Keywords: imagined audience, mixed-methods research, online dating, polymedia, self-presentation

Online dating has been a fruitful research area to reexamine the traditional theory of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC). The cues-filtered-out and potentially asynchronous nature of CMC in effect renders online impression management effortless and incentivizes users to engage in selective self-presentation (Walther, 1996). As online dating

poses a situation in which online self-presentation and future offline interaction intersect, online daters tend to present themselves strategically as both desirable and authentic (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008).

For sexual minorities, the selectiveness of self-presentation in online dating is also linked to being implicated in persistent stigma (Conner, 2019; Miller, 2015) and concerns about unsolicited attention and being outed (Chan, 2016). Such concerns are even more true for Chinese gay men because of the stronger stigma toward homosexuality and disproportionate platform surveillance (Wang, 2020). Gay dating apps therefore constitute an alternative and relatively safe space for gay men to negotiate their same-sex desires, even though privacy concerns are still at play within this space. However, this contradicts what we have observed, in that Chinese gay men disclose themselves and seek potential partners on Zhihu, which, unlike gay dating apps, is not specifically designed for sexual minorities.

Similar to Quora, Zhihu is an online question-answering platform in China with the aim of amassing professional and trustworthy answers to questions posed by users. According to an iResearch report, most Zhihu users are under the age of 35 (83%), hold a bachelor's degree or above (80.1%), and live in first- or second-tier cities (41.4%; DoNews, 2017). At the end of November 2018, Zhihu announced that its user base had exceeded 220 million (Techweb, 2018). However, deviating from the platform's stated goal, a certain Question X^2 has now become a pool into which "fishing bait" (Diaoyu tie) is released and where Chinese gay men seek to "fish" for potential partners. Based on Longxuan's long-term observation as a Zhihu user who has frequented this question page for three years, nearly all the answers to the question are self-presenting and, afforded by the multimodality of the platform, use texts, pictures, or even videos and website links. Any registered Zhihu user can respond by agreeing, commenting, favoriting, liking, and sending direct messages. By March 16, 2022, the Question X analyzed in this study had already garnered 9,479 answers, 32,685 followers, and 114 million page views, after being posed in May 2017.

In this article, we delve into the somewhat paradoxical phenomenon that, despite the risks of being outed and stigmatized, Chinese gay men have appropriated an open question-answering platform for online dating purposes by self-disclosing. In what follows, we first review the literature that informs this study: self-presentation in online dating and the specific dilemma faced by Chinese gay men. Then, we present our mixed-methods research, which is composed of two parts. First, a content analysis of self-presenting Zhihu answers was undertaken to answer the question of how Chinese gay men disclose themselves for dating purposes on Zhihu. To further explore why Chinese gay men are willing to present themselves in such detail, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 gay men who use Zhihu and here present the three themes identified from their interpretation. Last, the implications of this phenomenon of gay men dating online using non-dating apps are discussed before the conclusion of our article.

---

[2] The blurring of the question statement arises from the ethical concern that unsolicited attention might cause disturbance to this usually queer space. This concern is amplified given the recent censorship of LGBTQ WeChat accounts in China. As such, we refer to Question X in our study instead of the specific formulation of the question to anonymize this question space.

Literature Review

Strategic Self-Presentation in Online Dating

Self-presentation was a subject of study long before the emergence of CMC. In his classic book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) suggests that face-to-face interaction functions resemble a theatrical performance, whereby actors tend to manage their behaviors and perform their social roles to make a favorable and appropriate impression on others. Goffman's (1959) idea of impression management as a social product has had a major influence on our understanding of self-presentation. In particular, Goffman (1959) distinguishes expressions one "gives" (e.g., spoken messages) and "gives off" (e.g., nonverbal cues) in face-to-face communication.

However, the key characteristics of CMC, such as reduced nonverbal cues and potential asynchrony, have profoundly transformed offline interactions and enabled users to engage in selective online self-presentation (Walther, 2007). Instead of preventing personal information exchanges, the absence of nonverbal cues, as suggested by social information processing theory (Walther, 1992), incentivizes users to develop and manage relationships through other interactions by decoding alternative cues that are available in CMC. The hyperpersonal model further contends that the cue-reduced and asynchronous features of CMC allow users to have greater control over what information they give about themselves and, therefore, craft a more malleable and desirable image than in offline interaction (Walther, 1996).

Online dating has become a productive area for scholars to scrutinize online self-presentation. As a result of the editability of digital media and the impetus to attract potential partners, inaccuracy and deception are ubiquitous and effortless in online dating profiles (Hancock & Toma, 2009; Toma et al., 2008). However, online dating poses a specific online setting with the anticipation of future face-to-face interaction to develop romantic relationships (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Consequently, as prior research has demonstrated, online daters are motivated to balance enhancing their social attractiveness with maintaining an authentic depiction that would not be judged as deceptive in subsequent offline interaction (Ellison et al., 2006; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Toma et al., 2008). Rather than an exact representation of one's offline presence, profile-based self-presentation is conceptualized by Ellison, Hancock, and Toma (2012) as "a promise made to an imagined audience that future face-to-face interaction will take place with someone who does not differ fundamentally from the person represented by the profile" (p. 56).

As for gay men who use online dating platforms, their selective self-presentation is further complicated by the cultural valorization of masculinity and societal stigma toward a population with intersectional marginalized status (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Chan, 2016; Conner, 2019; Fitzpatrick, Birnholtz, & Brubaker, 2015; Miller, 2015, 2018). For example, Miller's (2015) study on profiles of Jack'd users found that gay men's self-presentation indicated a privileging of masculinity, such as visually presenting their torso and mentioning fitness level or body type in their self-description or partner preference. In addition to physical muscularity, the spatial and temporal dimensions of the body (e.g., a photo taken on a southern-east Asian beach during a holiday) are also of importance in gay men's self-presentation, as they showcase geographical mobility and a middle-class lifestyle (Bonner-Thompson, 2017). Furthermore, Conner (2019) also demonstrates that Grindr users' online performance and expression

actually reproduced various forms of discriminatory relations, including ageism, racism, and HIV stigma. In a nutshell, self-presentation on gay men's dating apps is still permeated by a hierarchy of inequality that is persistent in the offline world.

Current scholarship focuses exclusively on self-presentation within gay dating platforms, and gay online daters' self-disclosure beyond dating apps has largely escaped scrutiny. Advancing these studies, we planned to investigate how Chinese gay men construct their desirability and interest in attracting a same-sex partner on an open platform that is accessible to all. To better understand the tensions at play, we contextualize this phenomenon within the dilemma of the online expression of same-sex desire in today's China.

Stigma, Censorship, and the Online Expression of Same-Sex Desire in China

Homosexuality has long been under surveillance in China. Same-sex behaviors were pathologized and categorized as the vaguely defined crime of "hooliganism" during the 1980s and 1990s. Positive changes occurred around the turn of the 21st century. In 1997, the law criminalizing male homosexuality was rescinded. The third edition of the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorder* removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders in 2001. Despite these positive changes, the government remains silent about the legal protection of LGBTQ people's rights, and the societal acceptance toward nonnormative sexuality is still limited overall.

Given their marginalized status, digital media have been conceived by some scholars as empowering and of particular significance for sexual minorities in China (Bao, 2018; Yang, 2019). Bao's (2018) research documents various forms of queer activism enabled by digital media, such as Queer Comrades (a community webcast), and argues for a formation of a postsocialist queer subject in China today. However, censorship persists on Chinese media platforms. In recent years, platform regulation of LGBTQ content has become tighter and more precarious. For example, in April 2018, Sina Weibo announced a three-month clean-up campaign that juxtaposed homosexuality with pornography and violence as "vulgar content" that was rescinded after receiving a strong backlash (Shepherd, 2018). Similarly, Sina Weibo suddenly shut down the hashtag #les# (short for lesbian) but later reversed the ban after an outcry (*China Digital Times*, 2019).

Against this backdrop, dating apps constitute an important, if not the only, alternative space for LGBTQ people to navigate stigma and censorship in present-day China (Chan, 2021; Wang, 2020). On the one hand, gay social apps are the most popular media space wherein Chinese gay men not only seek romantic or sexual partners but also publicly express their sexual identities. As suggested by what Chan (2021) terms "networked sexual publics," dating apps afford a space in which sexual minorities negotiate existing power relations and strive for a place in the heteronormative world (p. 10). Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, gay dating apps do not exist in a vacuum. The persistent stigma toward and surveillance of homosexuality in the offline world are also at play online and affect how Chinese gay men present themselves on dating apps (Chan, 2016). Comparing U.S. and Chinese gay men users' profiles on Jack'd, Chan (2016) found that Chinese gay men were less likely to show their face on their profile because of the severe stigma. In other words, attracting unwanted attention and being outed were still serious concerns for many Chinese gay men, even on gay men's dating apps.

In general, it should be much harder for Chinese gay men to disclose their sexual orientation and express their desire to find a same-sex partner on a platform that is not exclusive to sexual minorities. This is at odds with what we observe on the Zhihu questions that have been used by gay men to advertise themselves and attract potential partners. In the next section, we present our investigation of how Chinese gay men disclose their personal information in answers given on Zhihu.

Content Analysis

We began our examination with content analysis, hoping to probe what the self-presentation of gay men on Zhihu generally contains. Two of the authors served as coders to process the sample. As members of the LGBTQ community, the two coders are seasoned in comprehending the wording gay men employ and can be sensitive to and accurate in evaluating the content of gay men's self-presentation.

Data Collection

Since the answers below Question X are updated in real time, which could have resulted in a messy coding procedure, we crawled and stored all the answer data at a specific moment on January 25, 2021, with the assistance of Python 3.7.6. After preprocessing, we obtained a data set with a sample size of 6,077. The data set mainly contains the users' nickname, profile picture URL, and answer content (including pictures). As we assumed that the samples in this data set are independent of each other, we used simple random sampling, which means that the probability of sample inclusion is consistent for each case, to obtain 425 samples. Finally, we manually screened out answers that were not relevant to the study (e.g., answers of only one sentence, such as "Give me a boyfriend please!") and selected a final sample of 413 for follow-up analysis.

Variables

Inspired by Miller's (2015) study, our variables focus on demographic information, self-descriptions, photo content, and preference in respect of partners in gay men's self-presentation. We also developed some specific codes, since Zhihu has particular technological conditions and sociality scripts. Finally, we narrowed the codes into five categories and 28 subcategories. In addition, we employed Krippendorff's (2004) alpha to check the reliability of each code with an overlapping subset of the actual sample (10.6%, $n = 44$). We used strict criteria and retained codes only with alpha values greater than 0.8 for our analysis, implying a high degree of consensus between the two coders.

Demographic Information

When considering that we derived all the data from gay men, we did not assess gender in this study. Age ($\alpha = 1$), height ($\alpha = 1$), weight ($\alpha = 1$), and location ($\alpha = 0.95$) are some of the basic elements of demographic information that we believe are also very common on other social platforms. Combined with our experience of using Zhihu to self-present for dating, we added highest educational attainment ($\alpha = 1$), hometown ($\alpha = 1$), occupation ($\alpha = 1$), and salary level ($\alpha = 0.65$) to our coding book. However, the variable

of salary level was not reliable and was deleted. For the code sexual position (α = 1), we added the value "advocacy of disrupting the binary," since we had noticed that some gay men expressed such opinions.

Basic Values

We could also use codes in this category to contribute to the category of self-description. We not only examined these codes in the text but also in some of the photos, videos, and links posted. In this category, personality (α = 0.83), character flaws (α = 0.85), hobbies/specialties (α = 0.92), routines (α = 0.93), comments on central attitudinal issues (α = 0.86), social relations (α = 0.81), the imagining of future intimacy (α = 0.86), and future career plans (α = 0.81), which can indicate basic values, were examined separately.

Self-Descriptions

In our study, other than instances of fitness/body (α = 0.87), we also added two other instances that often appear in the self-presentation of gay men on Zhihu for examination: cooking as a hobby/specialty (α = 1) and photography as a hobby/specialty (α = 1).

Photographic Content

We modified this category in line with Miller's (2015) code design and measured all codes by visual representations. Face photo (α = 0.88) and body photo (α = 0.93) could be coded as full, partial, or not given. We also measured having more than one face photo (α = 0.84).

Partner Preferences

Based on Miller's (2015) code design, we deleted unrelated codes, such as race preference, and then measured whether this category was given in respect of age (α = 1), masculinity/femininity (α = 0.65), location (α = 0.89), personalities (α = 0.93), or sexual position (α = 1). We deleted preference for a partner with traits of masculinity/femininity from the final coding book because of unreliability.

Quantitative Results: Toward Content-Rich Self-Presentation

Prior research has found that, because of a stronger stigma toward homosexuality, Chinese gay men are much less likely to place recognizable face pics of themselves on dating apps (Chan, 2016). The technological design of dating apps also influences their self-presentation, as Wang (2020) found that gay men in China tended to present themselves with simple numbers and labels on Blued, the most popular gay men's dating app in China. However, we found that on Zhihu, gay men incorporated a great deal of personal information in their answers to Question X (i.e., in their self-presentation).

In the same way as users of other gay men dating apps, gay men on Zhihu will present their demographic information explicitly in their self-presentation. To illustrate, 80.6% (*n* = 333) of the listed profile-like presentations showed an age, 70.5% (*n* = 291) showed height, and 59.8% (*n* = 247) showed weight.

Although only 27.6% (*n* = 114) of them introduced their hometown region, 84.5% (*n* = 349) indicated their current location, giving specific city names. About the answerers' occupation, 81.6% (*n* = 337) showed this information and 55.2% (*n* = 228) showed a student identity and 25.4% (*n* = 105) identified as middle-class workers. Another item to which we found frequent reference in the self-presentation of gay men on Zhihu was their highest educational level (63.9%, *n* = 264). As for sexual position, 55.7% (*n* = 230) of the answerers in our sample showed their preference. Notably, 13.1% (*n* = 54) showed, in particular, their attitude toward challenging divisions of sexual position, which provides support for a trend to at least some degree of self-identifying as having a flexible point on the spectrum of sexual position.

Differing from what Chan (2016) found on Jack'd, a gay dating app, that 36.8% of Chinese gay men showed at least one face pic in their profiles, it was notable to find that a higher percentage of Chinese gay men presented a face pic in their presentations on Zhihu, an open platform: 50.4% (*n* = 208). In addition, in contributing to building personal images, 52.8% of self-presentations showed either full-body (36.3%, *n* = 150) or partial-body (16.5%, *n* = 68) photos.

As for partner preference, only 9.2% (*n* = 38), 17.4% (*n* = 72), and 16.9% (*n* = 70) of the sample's presentations showed an age preference, location preference, and sexual position preference, respectively. Personality preference revealed another situation, as 48.2% (*n* = 199) of the sample presented this. We found that a height preference, weight preference, and occupation preference were only occasionally shown by our sample. It can be assumed that young, city-based gay men with a high level of educational attainment might maintain an open mind when seeking partners but emphasize personality and may prefer to make choices after more interactions rather than by setting preconditions.

On gay men's dating apps, self-presentation is typically almost over after displaying the above-discussed photos and partner preferences. Although gay dating apps provide more space for self-presentation (e.g., a self-introduction module) in addition to a series of multiple-choice questions, these spaces have strict word limits and are often ignored by gay men; MacKee (2016) also found that content presented in these spaces is always highly sexualized.

However, on Zhihu, it is possible to find a great deal of text used by gay men to describe their basic values and daily habits. We found that 76% (*n* = 314) of the sample showed their personality, 68.8% (*n* = 284) revealed their hobbies or specialties, and 50.6% (*n* = 209) presented comments on central attitudinal issues, including their attitudes to heterosexual marriage, sexual identities, family views, life attitudes, or even patriotism. Personality descriptions were always the most explicit and adequate. In addition, 46.5% (*n* = 192) depicted their imagining of future intimacy, showing their views on love to enhance the possibility of attracting like-minded people. Although we designed the codes to measure bodybuilding, cooking, and photography as hobbies, inspired by Miller (2015), only 17.7% (*n* = 73), 7.7% (*n* = 32), and 8.2% (*n* = 34), respectively, explicitly presented such hobbies.

It is worth emphasizing that 38.7% (*n* = 160) of the sample of gay men on Zhihu revealed their character flaws. Although most still strove to create an "ideal self" by presenting positive content (Ellison et al., 2006), many of them focused on the accuracy of their self-descriptions, disclosing their flaws openly.

The quantitative results depicted a different picture from traditional interpersonal theories, such as social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), which suggests an incremental model of relationship development wherein interactants start by sharing superficial information and gradually move to exchanging more intimate details. Instead, we echo a prior study on a Chinese online dating website (Ji & Lieber, 2008) that found core personal information are disclosed more frequently than factual ones at early stages of online relationships. This strategy indicates a specific cost-reward analysis in the context of online dating where emotional involvement is valorized. Our analysis also shows that Chinese gay men may disclose a large amount of personal information in their Zhihu answers at the very beginning of interactions. However, in our case, the costs of such disclosure are elevated given the potential stigma and threats of self-disclosing homosexuality in current-day China and that Zhihu is an open platform. Thus, a more puzzling question is posed by the aforementioned results: why are Chinese gay men willing to disclose such detailed personal information on Zhihu, for some, even more than on the gay men's dating apps that are specifically designed for them?

Semi-Structured Interviews

To help explain the puzzle, we conducted semi-structured interviews with gay men who use Zhihu for online dating. In January and February 2021, we recruited 16 participants. In addition to their dating experiences on Zhihu, we specifically asked informants why they were willing to present their personal and private information. Since this study is part of a larger project, we also included data from two previous rounds of interviews conducted by the first author for thematic analysis. The first round of tentative interviews occurred in June 2019, with a total of five informants sharing their experiences of using Zhihu for dating, such as when and why they started using Zhihu for dating and how they present themselves on Zhihu. The second round of interviews took place in August 2020, and the first author recruited nine gay men. The main questions focused on what they usually do on Zhihu and their feelings about it.

We want to acknowledge that 16 of the total 30 informants are friends of the first author, as *Guanxi* has been found to be a useful tool for data collection in China (Kriz, Gummesson, & Quazi, 2013). In some interviews, we particularly asked whether the participant would accept an interview request from strangers; most of them said no. We believe that the rapport between the researcher(s) and the participant(s) may have provided an incentive for informants to disclose private experiences and feelings.

We interviewed only five of the informants face-to-face because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and interviewed the rest by online voice call via WeChat. We found that although the absence of nonverbal cues might inhibit the immediate revealing of emotion, online interviews also make participants more comfortable sharing "sexual anecdotes."

At the beginning of the interviews, we gave each informant a basic introduction to the research and information about the rights they had. All the informants provided their written or oral permission to accept interviews. To protect the participants' privacy, we gave all informants pseudonyms for reporting the results of the research, and we deleted all the records once we completed the transcription.

In the coding stage, we applied the two-cycle coding afforded by Saldaña (2015) and highlighted in vivo coding to convey the subjectivity of the informants. We extracted themes after the pattern coding in the second round. During the coding process, we also drew on the experience of Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) and tried to demonstrate rigor and accuracy in the themes we identified. All the themes obtained, and the informant materials used for the analysis, were translated into English by the authors.

Qualitative Results

Stratified Privacy Concerns

The location-based service afforded by many dating apps was deemed a common concern for our informants when asked why they liked using Zhihu for dating. Although this technological feature creates the enormous convenience of connecting with gay men who are in the vicinity, it also causes tension, since many gay men do not want to be recognized by those around them; neither do they want it to be found out that they are looking for sex on such media (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014; Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015). For our informants, it felt safer and more acceptable to disclose their sexual orientation, desires, and personal information to audiences at a distance (Zhihu), compared to those who are physically nearby (Blued). We dub this mentality "stratified privacy concerns." In other words, participants' concerns about the risks and potential negative consequences associated with disclosing their privacy, sexuality in our case, vary with regard to the perceived location of the audiences. They showcase considerably higher privacy concerns when facing those in the vicinity.

Hansen (23, using Zhihu for dating for three years) stated, "I never post my own photos on Blued," and Zard (21, using Zhihu for dating for 3.5 years) explained that "it is because that Blued is location-based, and the people around you are bound to have some kind of social connection with you." The location-based service discourages gay men on Blued from showing detailed personal information for fear of being recognized by surrounding acquaintances. Such worry acts as a consistent and invisible threat to their sensitive identities.

Moreover, the location-based service and display of users online in real time, as afforded by Blued, also fuel the desire to seek casual sex. Johnny (23, using Zhihu for dating for two years) explained why gay men disclosed less information on Blued: "Users are looking for hook-ups on Blued, so they do not need to present much information for others to know." Those who refused casual sex may be harassed or reviled by others, such as Zhuanzhuan (22, using Zhihu for dating for four years), who complained that "there are always middle-aged gay men to continually send messages to me on Blued for hook-ups." Lingyuan (21, using Zhihu for dating for four years) also told us indignantly that when he refused someone's request for a hook-up, he was insulted and told that he was ugly. These encounters also point to users' concerns about presenting private information on location-based platforms. If users' private information, such as face pics, were to be leaked to those people who harassed or reviled them, it may result in the transformation of online conflicts into more physical dangers.

However, on Zhihu, an app without a location-based service, gay men who self-present detailed personal information have "a much smaller probability of being recognized by people around [them]"

(Andrew, 20, using Zhihu for dating for one year). Our informants accentuated "distance" several times. As David (18, using Zhihu for dating for two years) stated, "Zhihu does not show the distance among locations, so I think it is securer. Privacy can be more easily protected, under the comparison [with Blued]."

With the absence of a location-based service, the audiences on Zhihu are always perceived as strangers in the distance, which helps alleviate gay users' fear of being outed to someone who knows them. Duguay (2014) suggests that such context collapse is troubling for LGBTQ people, even when facing their friends, so they would like to group their friends and post different content on Facebook for different audiences. This also hints at the "stratified privacy concerns" that we identified, indicating that such concerns still haunt gay men when their interactants are acquaintances.

Driven by "stratified privacy concerns," gay men on Zhihu are less likely to worry about presenting private information. This alone does not, however, guarantee they will do so. Echoing Duguay's (2014) study, we noticed that in our informants' imagination, their self-presentation audiences are separated by the Zhihu mechanism. We contend that the remaining are "ideal audiences" in their imagination, and we demonstrate in the next section why these ideal audiences can attract gay men to present detailed personal information on Zhihu.

Separating Ideal Audiences

As Darwen (24, using Zhihu for dating for 0.5 years) claimed, "Not all of the people, will access [this question], if someone can find this [space], it means that he might also be a gay man." Our informants perceived that audiences other than gay men can seldom access the space, since "if they were straight men, they are not going to search for these questions, so algorithm on Zhihu will not recommend these questions [that gay men use for dating] for them" (Andrew).

We call these reported perceptions "perceived exclusion," and we regard this as a kind of "algorithmic imaginary" (Bucher, 2017, p. 31), which guides these gay men to believe that the Zhihu mechanism has been preventing those who are not homosexuals from finding this dating space. Hansen explained that "now the Internet is an information cocoon, so people may only see what they want, and if someone is following these questions, they must have the same sexual orientation as mine." Charlot (25, using Zhihu for dating for 3.5 years) spoke frankly about these questions being secluded, stating, "Many people in this group cannot find that Zhihu has such a function, not to mention those people outside." With such an imagining of an algorithm, gay men are more likely to feel encouraged to disclose personal information because when the audiences are nearly all gay men, they are nearly all potential daters.

In addition, our informants believed that since these potential daters are on Zhihu, they are more likely to have another common advantage, and that is the "quality (*suzhi* and *zhiliang*) of Zhihu users." According to Wu and Trottier (2021), these two folk concepts among Chinese gay men—*suzhi* (素质) and *zhiliang* (质量)—make up their understanding of quality: *suzhi* is related to a perception of another's civility during interaction and communication, and *zhiliang* often refers to the quality of one's face and body among such other aspects as age, education level, and income. As Zhihu claims to be a "high-quality knowledge-sharing platform" that has been gathering professionals from various industries in China ("Contact us," n.d.,

p. 1), there is an inherently high threshold for its user group. The nature of the platform functions as a gatekeeper, allowing users to regard others who are also able to integrate into Zhihu's activities as being "probably generally, better educated with higher *suzhi*" (Charlot). It is also from the perception of "being better educated" that Yinxing (21, using Zhihu for dating for two years) insisted that "Zhihu users have high *zhiliang*, as a joke said that their average educational level is 'Project 985 [the label of the most prestigious universities in China].'" Fengyi (19, using Zhihu for dating for 1.5 years) had a more immediate sense that "more than 100 gay men contacted me after I self-presented on Zhihu, and almost all of them at least have a bachelor's degree." With these perceptions, our informants may have a better imagining of these audiences compared to those on other dating platforms, as Ali (20, using Zhihu for dating for one year) claimed that "I just feel that Zhihu [gay men] users fulfill my criteria more for an ideal partner."

Thus, it is arguable that for gay men who self-present on Zhihu, these potential daters, whom they imagine to be of a high quality, are "ideal readers" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 120) who can make them more comfortable with creating content. These ideal readers have also attracted gay men on Zhihu to show detailed information, since they are aware that these audiences will screen their self-presentation to decide whether to initiate interaction and disclose personal information reciprocally (Ellison et al., 2006). "Separating ideal audiences" and "stratified privacy concerns" jointly shape Zhihu as a comfortable space for gay men, attracting them to disclose detailed personal information. However, what we want to indicate next is that this space has been marketized, which also encourages gay men who use Zhihu for dating to present detailed personal information.

Quantity Matters

Strategies such as displaying more types of masculinities (Miller, 2015) or implying decent lifestyles (Bonner-Thompson, 2017) have been demonstrated to be popular in enhancing gay men's competitiveness and improving the quality of their self-presentation. We acknowledge that quality is important in gay men's self-presentation, but we want to emphasize that in the dating market on Zhihu, quantity also matters. Two of the most noteworthy themes are specified here: "quantity as a filtering mechanism" and "quantity as a matching facilitator."

"Quantity as a filtering mechanism" means that, for many participants, the quantity of one's self-presentation on Zhihu is now functioning as a filtering criterion. Some dominant filtering criteria, such as whether the photo(s) is attractive, also take effect on Zhihu, as Liurui (24, using Zhihu for dating for four years) perceived that "in the online world, photography is a required course for every gay man." However, our informants frequently mentioned that gay men on Zhihu are strict with regard to the quantity of the content of others' self-presentation, and bridge quality and quantity by arguing that answers with a large amount of content are of high quality and those with a small volume of content are of low quality. Charlot explained how this filtering mechanism functions when asked why he was willing to present a large quantity of personal information in his self-presentation: "If others posted high-quality answers and you just posted a low-quality one, it seems Hmmm . . . there is a comparison when all of the others have good ones and you only have a bad one." This suggests that on Zhihu, content quantity has been regarded as a criterion for evaluating the quality of self-presentation by gay men, representing their dating attitudes.

Our informants also shared a lot of elements when screening others, such as attractive personalities, similar disciplines, common hobbies, and feasible future plans. Yinxing particularly indicated that the availability of knowing others clearly from their self-presentation was a specific reason for why he prefers Zhihu for dating. As Yaohao (24, using Zhihu for dating for one year) stated, "I hope others can describe themselves as much as possible, including their personal information, the expectation to daters, and future life. It would be much better if they can display their photos."

No one knows who was the first to post such a detailed introduction of himself; our informants simply described those people in general as "precursors." Our informants often mentioned a well-known couple: "Pappa and Frank, who found [each other] from Zhihu, are very popular on Bilibili (a Chinese cultural community based on video content), so many people will go to Zhihu to self-present to find daters too after learning about their love story on Bilibili" (Ali). The existence of such success stories has led to support for this self-presentation strategy: "When we saw these examples, we sent out our own dating post with particular hopefulness and details" (Cosette, 20, using Zhihu for dating for 0.5 years). Uno (22, using Zhihu for dating for 2.5 years) made the point that "I actually followed the style of this platform. Everyone is in this style, so I'm going along with it. That is, my behavior has been compliant with the behavior of most people." In this situation, those gay men who did not present a large quantity of personal information would be seen as insincere rule-breakers, and, at the same time, they have not provided enough information for others to check whether they are good matches; unless they had something very attractive (such as face pics or torso pics), they would most likely be filtered out immediately.

In addition, quantity acts as "a matching facilitator" in our case. Our informants indicated that presenting a large quantity of their personal information can help them save time in the process of matching, and they believed that to do so can accelerate the matching process and improve dating efficiency:

> Firstly, I can avoid chatting with those people who don't like me [after reading my detailed self-presentation], which is a waste of time for both of us. The other part is my chat cost, because for everyone, if I did not have such a self-introduction, I would have to retype and reintroduce myself as I talked to him, and that would mean that my marginal cost of matching would be high. To control the cost of my chat, I posted more information here. (Uno)

By presenting detailed information in advance, gay men on Zhihu can forward the link to their self-presentation to others when initiating interactions; to save time, they can also allow daters to check whether they match from a greater number of perspectives to decide whether to initiate interactions:

> From the words in your answer, and from the kind of logic you use to write your copy, or from what you want to say, [I can] form a general understanding of you in just a few minutes, and then determine whether I am interested in you or not. (Cosette)

As Hansen stated, "showing [my] hobbies and interests as much as possible can reduce the matching cost not only for me to find others but also for others to find me." Acting as a filtering mechanism and a matching facilitator, quantity matters for gay men who use Zhihu for dating. The

marketized environment demands they present a large quantity of personal information, or they may be filtered out by others, and individuals' marketized desires attract them to do so or they may lose efficiency in the process of matching. Thus, we want to suggest that in different dating markets with different marketized contexts, in addition to the quality, the quantity of content in self-presentation can also be an important factor.

Discussion

Repurposing Platforms for Online Dating in a Polymedia Environment

Our focus on online dating beyond dating apps among Chinese gay men resonates with previous research on other areas and platforms, and straight people as well. In other words, repurposing platforms for online dating has become increasingly common globally. A prominent example was Craigslist, a classified ad site where some people labelled themselves as "personal ads" and sold them in the "forum" (Peters, Thomas, & Morris, 2013, p. 80). Rosenbaum, Daunt, and Jiang (2013) identified 13 personal resources that heterosexuals and homosexuals displayed on Craigslist to enhance their advertising competitiveness, and they also specifically noted that gay men were primarily looking for sexual encounters on Craigslist. Lingel (2020, 2021) points out that the inherent anonymity of Craigslist enables a space for queer people and allows various socially stigmatized kinky sexual fetishes to be presented freely here. However, because of the freedom of dating that comes with such anonymity, Craigslist has been accused of leading to a range of risks such as sex trafficking, being raped, or even being murdered, and eventually, Craigslist decided to remove the section that allows people to present personal ads in March 2018 (Bonos, 2018). Still, people continue to explore the affordance of online dating in different platforms beyond dating apps. For example, TikTok has become popular as "the next Tinder" for lesbians (Wilson, 2020, p. 24).

Our case echoes this trend that Chinese gay men have repurposed an open platform—Zhihu—for dating. It is conducive to understand this phenomenon with the concept of polymedia. Proposed by Madianou and Miller (2013), polymedia indicates that users tend to employ different media platforms for different purposes, appropriating the affordances of different media to better manage varied social relationships. MacKee (2016) documented how gay men in London used Grindr for casual sex and Tinder for more serious relationships, because of the different feature designs of the two apps. Likewise, Wu and Trottier (2021) analyzed Chinese gay men's polymedia uses of dating apps that designate Blued and Grindr for instant encounters and Aloha and Tinder for long-term relationships.

We argue that the polymedia environment of online dating exists not only within various dating apps but also beyond dating apps and includes platforms that are not designed for matchmaking. Because of their different features and techno-culture, people develop different dating expectations for different platforms. Similar to the notable feature of anonymity of Craigslist that enables it as a place for kinky sexual encounters, our study on Zhihu suggests that, with its features and user portraits, Chinese gay men have appropriated it as a dating platform specifically for romantic relationships.

From our quantitative findings, it appears that gay men on Zhihu are more likely to *present detailed and specific information* about themselves and even to show character flaws honestly. According to Van De

Wiele and Tong (2014), gay men who seek romantic relationships are more likely to portray authentic information to others. A detailed display of interests, as well as hobbies, also helps them to find a man who can be matched with them and who can appreciate them in turn (Qiu & Huang, 2020). When talking about their screening criteria, our informants mentioned attractive personalities, similar disciplines, common hobbies, and feasible future plans, implying their preference for a long-term relationship.

Another evidence of this argument is *the slowed-down dating pace* that gay men on Zhihu kept. The absence of a location-based service and filtering system makes it difficult for them to find those nearby, and thus they have to browse others' self-presentations slowly to get to know them. These "speed bumps" provided by these features facilitate the cultivation of long-term relationships (Wu & Trottier, 2021, p. 11). The slow tempo of browsing and the sequence of meetings after a period of chatting also conform to the normative timing of romantic relationship formation (Yeo & Fung, 2018).

Queering Digital Space via Online Dating

Repurposing Zhihu as a dating space not only expands the polymedia availability of dating practices for gay man individuals but also serves to queer digital spaces for the gay community. Through creating digital queer spaces, it retakes the role of affording connections and contact across neighborhoods for gay community (Renninger, 2018) and promoting the revitalization of those traditional queer spaces (Baudinette, 2019). Considering the stronger stigma and threats now faced by sexual minorities in China, we argue that queering digital spaces via online dating on Zhihu has more significant implications.

It should be reemphasized that Zhihu is an open platform that everyone can access; thus, queering Zhihu spaces via online dating showcases the political potential of challenging heteronormativity. Gay men who are drawn to Zhihu by these dating spaces may participate in other discussions of other questions in a diffuse manner, as our informants reported that they have answered questions such as "what is the experience of having an interesting boyfriend?" when surrounded by considerable numbers of heterosexual users, and "what is the experience of a gay man expressing his love to a straight man?" which obtained friendly support from heterosexual users. Although, as our informants imagined, other groups of users may enter queer spaces only by accident, the interior members find it easy to travel outside, encountering and interacting with other groups of users, spreading queer narratives, and increasing queer visibility.

The practices of queering digital space via online dating can also be found on other Chinese platforms, such as gay people registering on Tantan, a straight dating app, or cruising on Douban, a mainstream bookmarking website. These queer spaces are fragmentary but gradually expand the living space for gay men online. It also embodies gay men's agency and flexibility in appropriating digital technologies and struggling with suppression. However, it should also be acknowledged that in these spaces with queer potentials, achieving individual desires rather than collective resistance remains the main purpose. Some neoliberal dating norms have been persistently reproduced by gay men here: attractive photos as an exception to challenge the rules, the pursuit of efficiency as individual desires to strengthen marketization, and an emphasis on quality as a matching expectation to reinforce marginalization.

Conclusion

Through our content analysis, we have demonstrated that gay men who use Zhihu for dating display content-rich self-presentation; in addition to the demographic information required on dating apps, gay men on Zhihu are more likely to show face pics of themselves and describe in detail their educational level, personality, world views, daily habits, and even character flaws.

We then conducted interviews and thematic analysis, trying to explain this counterintuitive phenomenon. First, we found that the absence of a location-based service works. Driven by "stratified privacy concerns," gay men on Zhihu are less likely to worry about presenting personal information for audiences that are at a distance, but this does not mean they will do so. Second, we identified that gay men on Zhihu may believe that the Zhihu mechanism had separated audiences for them, and those remaining were imagined as "ideal audiences" by them—potential high-quality daters, attracting them to disclose detailed personal information. Finally, we indicated that this dating space has been marketized and that quantity acts as "a filtering mechanism" and "a matching facilitator," necessitating such a self-presentation strategy to gratify both environmental demands and their personal desires.

Gay men's dating apps as alternative spaces are indeed integrated into the daily life of gay men, but their everyday media practices also encompass other more open platforms, deserving more attention. We should also acknowledge that our study did not present an intersectional experience because of the similar backgrounds of our informants, or accommodate other factors such as policy into our discussion. We hope that future studies can look at other open platforms, such as Douyin (also known as TikTok), to explore the dating practices of gay men from more diverse backgrounds and include more factors such as algorithms and other technologies in the discussion.

References

Altman, I., & Taylor, D. A. (1973). *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Bao, H. (2018). *Queer comrades: Gay identity and Tongzhi activism in postsocialist China*. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.

Baudinette, T. (2019). Gay dating applications and the production/reinforcement of queer space in Tokyo. *Continuum, 33*(1), 93–104. doi:10.1080/10304312.2018.1539467

Birnholtz, J., Fitzpatrick, C., Handel, M., & Brubaker, J. R. (2014). Identity, identification and identifiability: The language of self-presentation on a location-based mobile dating app. In A. Quigley & S. Diamond (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices & Services* (pp. 3–12). Toronto, Canada: ACM. doi:10.1145/2628363.2628406

Blackwell, C., Birnholtz, J., & Abbott, C. (2015). Seeing and being seen: Co-situation and impression formation using Grindr, a location-aware gay dating app. *New Media & Society, 17*(7), 1117–1136. doi:10.1177/1461444814521595

Bonner-Thompson, C. (2017). "The meat market": Production and regulation of masculinities on the Grindr grid in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. *Gender, Place & Culture, 24*(11), 1611–1625. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2017.1356270

Bonos, L. (2018, March 23). Goodbye, Craigslist personal ads. Those seeking casual sex will miss you. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soloish/wp/2018/03/23/goodbye-craigslist-personal-ads-those-seeking-casual-sex-will-miss-you/

Bucher, T. (2017). The algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society, 20*(1), 30–44. doi:10.1080/1369118x.2016.1154086

Chan, L. S. (2016). How sociocultural context matters in self-presentation: A comparison of U.S. and Chinese profiles on Jack'd, a mobile dating app for men who have sex with men. *International Journal of Communication, 10*, 6040–6059. Retrieved from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5829

Chan, L. S. (2021). *The politics of dating apps: Gender, sexuality, and emergent publics in urban China*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

China Digital Times. (2019, April 17). Weibo reverses ban on lesbian content amid uproar. *China Digital Times*. Retrieved from https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2019/04/weibo-reverses-ban-on-lesbian-content-amid-uproar/

Conner, C. T. (2019). The gay gayze: Expressions of inequality on Grindr. *The Sociological Quarterly, 60*(3), 397–419. doi:10.1080/00380253.2018.1533394

Contact us. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.zhihu.com/contact

DoNews. (2017, October 20). Zhihu fabu yonghu baogao: Yonghu qunti duoyuanhua, renwei zhihu zhuanye, zhenshi, yuanchuang [Zhihu issues user report: Diverse users, and professional, authentic, and original answers]. *DoNews*. Retrieved from https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1581762309457478822&wfr=spider&for=pc

Duguay, S. (2014). "He has a way gayer Facebook than I do": Investigating sexual identity disclosure and context collapse on a social networking site. *New Media & Society, 18*(6), 891–907. doi:10.1177/1461444814549930

Ellison, N. B., Hancock, J. T., & Toma, C. L. (2012). Profile as promise: A framework for conceptualizing veracity in online dating self-presentations. *New Media & Society, 14*(1), 45–62. doi:10.1177/1461444811410395

Ellison, N. B., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11*(2), 415–441. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00020.x

Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5*(1), 80–92. doi:10.1177/160940690600500107

Fitzpatrick, C., Birnholtz, J., & Brubaker, J. R. (2015). Social and personal disclosure in a location-based real time dating app. In *Proceedings of the 48th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences HICSS* (pp. 1983–1992). New York, NY: IEEE. doi:10.1109/HICSS.2015.237

Gibbs, J. L., Ellison, N. B., & Heino, R. D. (2006). Self-presentation in online personals: The role of anticipated future interaction, self-disclosure, and perceived success in Internet dating. *Communication Research, 33*(2), 152–177. doi:10.1177/0093650205285368

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Hancock, J. T., & Toma, C. L. (2009). Putting your best face forward: The accuracy of online dating photographs. *Journal of Communication, 59*(2), 367–386. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01420.x

Ji, P., & Lieber, P. S. (2008). Emotional disclosure and construction of the poetic "other" in a Chinese online dating site. *China Media Research, 4*(2), 32–42. Retrieved from https://www.chinamediaresearch.net/index.php/back-issues?id=29

Krippendorff, K. (2004). Reliability in content analysis: Some common misconceptions and recommendations. *Human Communication Research, 30*(3), 411–433. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2004.tb00738.x

Kriz, A., Gummesson, E., & Quazi, A. (2013). Methodology meets culture. *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management, 14*(1), 27–46. doi:10.1177/1470595813493265

Lingel, J. (2020). *An Internet for the people: The politics and promise of Craigslist*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lingel, J. (2021, January). A queer and feminist defense of being anonymous online. In *Proceedings of the 54th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (pp. 2534–2543). Maui, HI: HICSS. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10125/70925

MacKee, F. (2016). Social media in gay London: Tinder as an alternative to hook-up apps. *Social Media + Society, 2*(3), 1–10. doi:10.1177/2056305116662186

Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2013). Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 16*(2), 169–187. doi:10.1177/1367877912452486

Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society, 13*(1), 114–133. doi:10.1177/1461444810365313

Miller, B. (2015). "Dude, where's your face?" Self-presentation, self-description, and partner preferences on a social networking application for men who have sex with men: A content analysis. *Sexuality & Culture, 19*(4), 637–658. doi:10.1007/s12119-015-9283-4

Miller, B. (2018). Textually presenting masculinity and the body on mobile dating apps for men who have sex with men. *The Journal of Men's Studies, 26*(3), 305–326. doi:10.1177/1060826518773417

Peters, C. O., Thomas, J. B., & Morris, R. (2013). Looking for love on Craigslist: An examination of gender differences in self-marketing online. *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness, 7*(3), 79–95. Retrieved from http://www.na-businesspress.com/jmdc/petersco_web7_3_.pdf

Qiu, H., & Huang, S. (2020). Mobile dating, relational communication, and motivations for aids risk reduction among Chinese MSM college students. *Health Communication, 35*(3), 289–296. doi:10.1080/10410236.2018.1560580

Renninger, B. J. (2018). Grindr killed the gay bar, and other attempts to blame social technologies for urban development: A democratic approach to popular technologies and queer sociality. *Journal of Homosexuality, 66*(12), 1736–1755. doi:10.1080/00918369.2018.1514205

Rosenbaum, M. S., Daunt, K. L., & Jiang, A. (2013). Craigslist exposed: The Internet-mediated hookup. *Journal of Homosexuality, 60*(4), 505–531. doi:10.1080/00918369.2013.760305

Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Shepherd, C. (2018, April 16). China's Sina Weibo reverses gay content clean-up after outcry. *Reuters*. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-lgbt-censorship-idUSKBN1HN0KI

Techweb. (2018, December 13). Zhihu xuanbu yonghu shu po 2.2 yi, tongbi zengzhang 102% [Zhihu announces its user base exceeded 220 million, up 102% year-on-year]. *Techweb*. Retrieved from http://www.techweb.com.cn/internet/2018-12-13/2716845.shtml

Toma, C. L., Hancock, J. T., & Ellison, N. B. (2008). Separating fact from fiction: An examination of deceptive self-presentation in online dating profiles. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34*(8), 1023–1036. doi:10.1177/0146167208318067

Van De Wiele, C., & Tong, S. T. (2014). Breaking boundaries: The uses & gratifications of Grindr. In J. Kientz, J. Scott, J. Song, A. Brush, & A. Friday (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2014 ACM International Joint Conference on Pervasive and Ubiquitous Computing* (pp. 619–630). Seattle, WA: ACM. doi:10.1145/2632048.2636070

Walther, J. B. (1992). Interpersonal effects in computer-mediated interaction: A relational perspective. *Communication Research, 19*(1), 52–90. doi:10.1177/009365092019001003

Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research, 23*(1), 3–43. doi:10.1177/009365096023001001

Walther, J. B. (2007). Selective self-presentation in computer-mediated communication: Hyperpersonal dimensions of technology, language, and cognition. *Computers in Human Behavior, 23*(5), 2538–2557. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2006.05.002

Wang, S. (2020). Calculating dating goals: Data gaming and algorithmic sociality on Blued, a Chinese gay dating app. *Information, Communication & Society, 23*(2), 181–197. doi:10.1080/1369118x.2018.1490796

Wilson, L. (2020, June 29). For lesbians, TikTok is "the next Tinder." *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/style/lesbian-tiktok-dating.html

Wu, S., & Trottier, D. (2021). Constructing sexual fields: Chinese gay men's dating practices among pluralized dating apps. *Social Media + Society, 7*(2), 1–14. doi:10.1177/20563051211009014

Yang, Y. (2019). Bargaining with the state: The empowerment of Chinese sexual minorities/LGBT in the social media era. *Journal of Contemporary China, 28*(118), 662–677. doi:10.1080/10670564.2018.1557943

Yeo, T. E. D., & Fung, T. H. (2018). "Mr Right Now": Temporality of relationship formation on gay mobile dating apps. *Mobile Media & Communication, 6*(1), 3–18. doi:10.1177/2050157917718601