Datafied Gay Men's Dating

Ordering of Sexual Sociality on Blued

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ABSTRACT

The entanglement of everyday life and digital media, particularly mobile media, is extending into the realm of human sexuality, romance and intimacy. Gay online dating apps have become intensive sites of data generation, algorithmic processing and cross-platform data sharing, which is termed as the 'datafication of dating cultures'. There is a lack of scholarly discussion on social consequences of the datafication of dating for gay men. By reviewing the literature on mediated gay's dating, datafication and social order, and sexual sociality, this study theorises the consequences of datafied gay men's dating as 'the ordering of gay sexual sociality through datafication'.

The empirical part of this study uses the profile creation and browse filter function of Blued, the largest dating app for gay men in China, as an example to explore how gay sexual sociality is ordered through data processes and structures. Using the 'walk-through method' combined with 8 semi-structured qualitative interviews, this study finds that, the gay sexual sociality ordered through datafication may institutionalise an inequality on Blued that for gay men implies differentiation and stratification of visibility and interaction opportunities. This differentiation and stratification: 1) builds on users' classification practices of themselves and others on Blued; 2) corresponds to a status hierarchy regarding sexual attractiveness; and 3) is rationalised by algorithmic culture and efficiency discourses.

This study not only provides insights into the debates on the social consequences of datafication and the reformation of social relations by gay dating apps but also provides a theoretical perspective on a more inclusive, equal and united online gay community.

INTRODUCTION

The entanglement of everyday life and digital media, especially mobile media, is extending to the realm of human sexuality, romance, and intimacy. Online dating services are often characterized by their search functionality which enables users to establish interpersonal relationships via the internet, including the searching for life partners, flirts or sexual partners. According to Statista (2021), the online dating services market is expected to reach £3,677 million in revenue in 2022, with the number of users expected to amount to over 478 million globally by 2025. The online dating service market has become a significant sector of the digital economy. Within this market, LGBTQ people constitute a large user base especially in those highly populous country. In China, it is estimated that there is over 1.3 million monthly active users (MAU) of online dating services (199IT, 2019). Often difficult to identify in real life and sometimes invisible due to cultural traditions and legal policies, they rely more on online dating devices to provide them with a safer and more discreet way to seek affective and sexual partners and to expand their social networks (Wu & Ward, 2018). On the other hand, online dating services have evolved along with advances in information and communication technology. *From* the emergence of dating sites such as Gaydar in the late 1990s which marked the introduction of a 'database model' to online dating, *to* the boom of mobile dating apps due to the mass availability of smartphones and geolocative technologies such as GPS, online dating has entered the mobile era. With the increasing maturity of large-scale data mining, algorithmic processing and automated decision-making techniques, the functions such as structured profile creation, algorithmic matching and browse filter have become common features of many dating applications. In some ways, online dating apps have become intensive sites for data generation, algorithmic processing and cross-platform data sharing.

The integration of technologies and dating, referred to as the 'technological mediation of sexuality and romantic relationship', has sparked academic interest, leading to a growing body of research on dating and hook-up apps within social media studies. The existing academic literature around gay dating apps (GDAs) currently focuses on two areas. The first branch of

research, and by far the most extensive, aims to shed light on the ways in which dating apps shape and influence gay men's dating behaviours. Viewing dating apps as a channel for interpersonal communication, this branch focuses on how gay men actually use the features of dating apps to present themselves and interact with others in specific sociocultural contexts. The second strand of research, assuming that gay men social relations are formed in the course of interaction, is concerned about how mediated affective and sexual interactions reform gay social arrangements, including patterns of interpersonal relations and institutional structure of social organisations. Grounded in contemporary political and social theory, this branch has long been interested in the role of dating apps in the transformation of gay communities and the rise of 'sex culture'. However, as Wu (2017) points out, there is a current lack of studies investigating how mobile GDAs as the socio-technical artefact is distinct from, yet influenced by, other media forms such as SNSs or former dating sites in terms of their technological logic, and how such technological logic influences users' practices, attitudes, and perceptions of sexuality and dating, thus fitting into the process of transforming social relations. Large scale data collection and analysis is precisely one aspect of the emerging technological logic of dating apps. While Albury's (2017) 'datafication of dating' is a good starting point for analysing the institutionalised data collection and processing embedded in online dating, his work lacks further consideration of 'transformation of social life' as the deeper meaning of 'datafication' (Mejias & Couldry, 2019: 2). The question that should be discussed is: what does the datafication of dating mean for gay men? How are gay men's social life and relations transformed through the datafication of dating?

This study will answer these questions using Blued, the largest dating app for gay men in China, as an example. As of February 2019, over 90 per cent of the mobile users of LGBT dating and matchmaking apps in China were men, and Blued, Rela, Aloha, and LesPark were the major online dating platforms in the Chinese LGBT community, among which Blued has 79% of China's LGBTQ dating software market with 22 million monthly active users (199IT, 2019). In July 2020, Blued's parent company, BlueCity, rang the bell on NASDAQ, marking Blued as a global representative of gay male social networking providers. Although Blued is positioned

as an instant messaging service for a segment of the population and advocates for an inclusive online gay community, due to its location-based sociotechnical logic, Blued has long been framed as a hook-up app similar to its foreign competitor, Grindr. Moreover, based on my five-year experiences of using Blued, I have observed and sensed a subculture on Blued marked primarily by physical appearance. For instance, older, out of shape and feminine gay men are more likely to be discriminated against and ostracized, while users with a typically masculine, well-built or muscular appearance tend to be more popular. This subculture has been well observed and discussed academically in the context of Grindr (e.g., Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Conner, 2018), but is rarely elaborated by researchers in the Chinese context. Besides, compared to Grindr, Blued offers more features and interfaces, even regarding the two basic functions – creating a profile creation and browsing – which marks Blued higher level of datafication. The similarities and differences between the two apps make Blued a very interesting case at the intersection of datafication and sexual social relations.

This study is an attempt to understand the social consequences of datafied dating for gay men. Using Blued as an example, this study aims to understand how datafication, as a new technological logic, fits into the formation and transformation of gay men's social relations through their datafied dating practices, thus filling a gap in the relevant literature on both GDAs and critical data studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter encompasses a critical review of the related literature followed by the conceptual framework and the statement of research questions.

Theorising Datafied Dating

Although some scholars have noticed the data processes in GDAs and the dating practices based on them, there is a lack of further theorising on the 'datafication of dating'. This section begins by reviewing the key concepts surrounding datafied gay men's dating.

Data and datafication

Society is being transformed through the process of datafication. The term 'datafication' was introduced by Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier who propose 'to datafy a phenomenon is to put it in quantified form so that it can be tabulated and analysed' (Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier, 2014: 78). Couldry and Yu define 'datafication' as the process 'whereby life-process must be converted into streams of data inputs for computer-processing' (Couldry and Yu, 2018: 4473). Through this process, almost every aspect of human life, such as shopping, education, health, friendship, romance, beauty and even sex, regardless of the public or private life, are experienced an impulse to be measured, quantified, analysed and predicted. The drive to 'render human behaviour into an analysable form' (Mayer-Schonberger & Cukier, 2014: 93-94) has penetrated the field of human's affective, sexual and intimate interactions, which is termed as 'datafication of dating cultures' (Albury, Burgess, Race, & Wilken, 2017).

Datafication process starts from the quantification of human life (Mejias & Couldry, 2019). Mejias *et al.* (2019) identified two prior conditions for the quantification of human life. The one is the *reorganisation* of human habits which means life actions previously performed elsewhere, i.e., in offline space, becomes actions performed via the applications and platforms. The increasing entanglement of everyday life and digital media, especially mobile applications, demonstrates the notion of 'mediation of everything' (Livingstone, 2009). The other condition is on the *abstraction* of social life by which the attributes, behaviours and meanings of humans are transformed into computer-recognisable data units thus fitting into the computer coding grammars. This condition demonstrates the implications of Bowker and Star's (1999) arguments on 'classification' that data exists by segmenting the world to make it fitted with computer coding grammars, thus recreating sociality. In shorts, the first condition i.e. 'mediation of human life' expresses the prerequisites of datafication, while the second i.e. 'abstraction of social life' implies both the prerequisites and social consequences of datafication.

This study, aiming to explore social consequences of datafication of gay men's dating is largely informed by above two aspects: how gay men's affective and sexual interactions are performed on mobile dating applications, and how the interactions are abstracted to fit with computing codes for analysis and processing; and how the fits between the sexual interactions and the technological mechanisms restructuralise gay men's social relations. We begin by reviewing the literature on the mediated gay's dating, with a focus on the concept of affordance.

The mediation of gay men's dating

Much of the current literature on gay dating apps (GDAs) mainly involves two subtopics. The one is how gay men actually use the affordances of dating apps in their everyday life to build self-attractiveness and interaction with others. For example, Brinholtz *et al.* (2014) described how gay men utilise the GDA's systematic default profile (e.g., tags of ethnicity, figure type and age) and textual headline (e.g., graduating institution) strategically to disclose the information that they think may make them look more attractive. As some GDAs such as Jack'd and Blued has removed the tag of 'hook-up' or 'right now' in the structured profile, users may adopt other informational and linguistic strategies to implicate or explicate their goals (Chan, 2016; Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018; Birnholtz *et al.*, 2014). During the stage of private chatting, users may align with a form of 'linguistic ideology' which can prevent the electronic-mediated 'friendly conversation' from leading to the 'relation development' that is a breach of the 'sexual script' (Licoppe *et al.*, 2016). The other subtopic is about how dating apps affordances reform gay men's patterns of social relationships and the structures of institutions, focusing on the GDAs' roles in the decline of the gay community (Holt, 2011; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016), the rise of a culture of casual sex (Davis, *et al.*, 2016; Yeo & Fung, 2017) and the replication of dominant gender norms (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016). The current research on GDAs, however, still mainly focuses on the GDAs' role in remediating of gay men's dating practices and the reformation of gay men's social arrangements, with insufficient attention paid to the materiality and technological mechanisms of GDA as a technological artefact which is a key element of mediation of dating (Wu, 2017).

The term 'mediation' began to appear frequently in the 1970s and 1980s as a way to articulate the convergence of mass media and interpersonal communication (Lievrouw, 2009). With the cultural turn in communication studies and a growing recognition among media scholars about co-construction between technologies and society, the mediation is conceptualised as 'an ongoing and mutual reshaping of communicative actions and communication technology' which actually constitutes human experiences (Lievrouw, 2009). As interpreted by Lievrouw and Livingstone, the mediation concept refers not only to 'the insertion of technology into the process of human communication or information production' (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2009: 6), but also to the ways in which technological channels are used and in which people moderate, negotiate and intervene. Applying Lievrouw's (2014) mediation framework, the dating devices as artefacts enable, extend or constrain people's abilities to communicate while people may employ these devices to engage in dating and sexual encountering practices, during the process of which the social arrangement i.e. relation patterns and institutional structures regarding the artefacts and practices may be reformed.

The theories of affordances provide a useful perspective to apply mediation framework to understand online dating. Built from Gibson (1977), the affordances are 'opportunities for or invitations to actions that things present to actors', and as the 'potential uses' of an object (Hjarvard, 2008: 121). Latour and Venn (2002) conceptualise affordances as the 'permission and promise' (Latour and Venn, 2002: 250) made by artefact creators to actors and as the implication of the creators' intentions and power. In this sense, the affordances of dating apps can be understood as the properties or features of objects and settings that 'invite' users to perform the dating and sexually related actions in a particular way (Hutchby, 2001), thus involving the guidance, extension or restriction of user behaviour and power dynamics between app designers and users. The implications of affordances notion on mediated dating are that, for one thing, the functionality of dating affordances emerge from the apps' technological configuration and build relationships of users with the apps through influencing users' dating practices. For another, the users' perceptions of the affordances, in turn, is shaped by the pattern of relations and institutional formations that create social knowledge and power

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(Lievrouw, 2014). In this regard, exploring datafied dating's consequences requires an understanding of how the data process and structure i.e. datafication is embodied by *affordances* of GDAs, as well as how the datafication on GDAs is experienced and perceived by users in their everyday dating life.

Consequences of Datafication

Exploring the social consequences of datafied dating can begin with understanding the social consequences of datafication in the general sense. This section reviews the relevant literature.

Data culture on dating apps

There is a growing body of literature that recognises the critical role of datafication and algorithmic curation in mobile dating apps. For instance, Wang's (2020) internet ethnographic work on Blued reveals how the sexually affective data produced in live streaming functions constitute key corporate assets that underlie the operation of Blued as a business platform on one hand, and that transform users into paid labour. Parisi and Comunello (2019) investigate how dating app users may perceive the role of dating algorithms in shaping the homogeneity and heterogeneity of their intimate and social relationships. Despite the scholarly efforts in approaching 'datafication of dating' from the theoretical lens of the reformation of 'patterned social and institutional arrangements' (Lievrouw, 2014: 26), these works employ either a structural political economy perspective or an individual functionalism approach to examine the consequences of datafication. A relatively little literature grasp the meso-level dynamics between the dating apps' data process or structure and the users' dating practices as well as the corresponding social consequences.

In this regard, the work on 'data culture' by Albury,*et al.* (2017) provides a good starting point. Framing mobile dating apps as intense sites of data collection, algorithmic processing and cross-platform data tracking, Albury *et al.* identify four 'data cultures' existing in dating apps to describe 'how various forms of intimate personal and social data are mined and exploited by corporations and lived with and negotiated by users' (Albury *et al.*, 2017: 2). The notion of data cultures, on one hand, sheds light on a set of institutionalised routines, habits and

knowledge practices of dating app designers with respect to data mining i.e. the design of data production mechanism (termed as 'data culture of production'). This mechanism is often embedded in the affordances of a dating app such as its 'structural profile' that allows a user to present his or her age, gender, sex role, figure type, etc. in a pre-defined way. On the other, the data culture of dating, particularly the notion of 'data culture of use' highlights that, dating app users are not 'passive audiences' that are subject to being measured and calculated by data technologies (Gillespie, 2016; Striphas, 2015). Rather, users can actively negotiate and resist the data process as well as act upon the data they offered to shape the algorithmic results (Albury *et al.*, 2017; David & Cambre, 2016). In this sense, the production of data by users and the use of the data they produce can be seen as a kind of practice; and the data culture on dating apps can be understood as a continual process embedded in data practice by which the users' identities or experiences on online dating apps *and* the apps' data process and structure are mutually mediated and shaped.

On this basis, this study frames gay men's mediated dating afforded by GDAs' data and algorithmic technologies as the 'everyday production and use of affective and sexual data', referred to as 'everyday data practice'. According to Bourdieu's (1977) theories of practice, the social structure is actualised and reproduced between dialectical relations between objective structures and subjective dispositions. The social consequences of datafied dating for gay men can, therefore, be conceived as a certain social structure that emerges and is reproduced from gay men users' data practices, i.e., from users' use of technical structure of dating apps to produce data and use the data they produce. As mentioned earlier, data is produced based on 'abstraction of social life by which the attributes, behaviours and meanings of humans are transformed into computer-recognisable data units thus fitting into the computer coding grammars'. This condition, which expresses both how data is produced and how data recreates social world, resonates with the notion of classification (Bowker & Stars, 1990; Fourcade & Healy, 2013), which will be reviewed in the remainder of this section.

Classification

So far the critical social science researches on big data, algorithms and automated-decision have covered most aspects of social life. The phenomena about datafication of online shopping, social management, education, work and labour, health and fitness have received large scholarly interests (e.g., Rieder & Sire, 2013; Levy, 2015). Different from the focus of computer and information science, social science researchers' interests in datafication lie in the implications of datafication on human's social life. For example, Eubanks (2017) investigates how the data-driven welfare management featured with population profiling and algorithmic processing reproduce and automate historical inequality in the US. Levy's (2015) fieldwork on US truck drivers reveals the way in which the data process, abstracting and resocialising of data, discriminate precarious workers by increasing the management control and the vulnerability the workers suffered. Revolving around the consequences of datafication, the current literature attempts to answer how the data process fits into the forming of social order and reshapes everyday life (Couldry, 2020).

In this regard, Fourcade and Healy's (2013) work on the transformation of the credit market in the United States is instructive. They demonstrate how the data-based actuarial techniques are increasingly used by the neoliberal era market institutions to split and sort individuals into new 'classification situations', thus shaping individuals' life chances. According to Fourcade *et al.* (2013), compared to the traditional class situation manufactured and managed by bureaucratic power or monopolistic private actors, the new 'classification situation' that does not protect certain groups through the creation of rents and monopolies seems more democratic. However, the new classification situation 'thrives on the market's competitive logic, demanding that people are continually scored and measured against one another based on particular metrics namely credit risk, and then separating and recombining them into groups for efficiency and profits' (Fourcade *et al*, 2013: 560). The result is that different groups of people subjectively experience an objectively-measured 'cumulative pattern of advantage and disadvantage' (Fourcade *et al*, 2013: 559) in terms of consumption, employment and other socioeconomic domains, and the groupings are not *naturally* pre-existing, but are *artificially*

generated by classification systems that measure one's credit score or credit risks (Fourcade *et al*, 2013).

Fourcade and Healy's (2013) work suggests the way in which individual conditions are measured and assessed quantitively by market-owned and profit-oriented classificatory systems and in which these individuals are classified into different artificially-generated categories with different life chances. This process resonates with Bowker and Star's (1999) notion of classification that is understood as a 'spatial, temporal or spatio-temporal segmentation of the world', creating objects that fit within categories constructed by classifiers rather than sorting objects into natural categories already there. Applying both Fourcade's(2013) and Bowker's (1999) arguments to making sense of roles of data in shaping social order, Couldry (2020) argues that datafication is built from practices of classification and categorisation because data is produced only when social worlds are classified into computer-recognisable units to work with computer grammars. Also, datafication recreates social worlds since the classified tend to interact with, i.e. think about, conceptualise and possibly adapt to, the classification systems themselves, during which new social relations and interactions are formed (Couldry, 2020; Hacking, 1999).

The social consequences of datafication, as argued by Couldry (2020), can be apprehend by examining how data processes fit into the forming of social order and reshape social life. Therefore, the consequences of datafied dating on gay men can be conceived from the lens in terms of what roles data play in the forming of sexual interaction order, or in the ordering of gay sexual sociality. Drawn on Fourcade's (2013) and Bowker's (1999) notions of classification, this study aims to provide a detailed investigation in terms of how datafication of dating is built from gay men's classification practices on dating apps, and how gay men's interactions with classification systems shape their sexual interaction order. Besides, Fourcade and Healy's (2013) 'classification situation' also implicates an unequal distribution of life chances and resources. Informed by this, the study further asks what the sexual interaction order formed through datafication *means* for gay men; put it differently, what are the sexual implications that the ordering of sexual sociality via data process has on gay men.

Theorising Gay Sexual Sociality

Since the ordering of sexual sociality can be seen as a consequence of data technologies embedded into gay men's online dating, and in Albury's (2017) words, of 'the technological mediation of sexuality and romantic relationships', the question should be situated into the broad literature context regarding 'social consequences of mediated gay's dating'. Hence the rest of this chapter will review the relevant debates on this topic and will theorise 'gay sexual sociality', a term that has been used a few times in previous parts.

Debating social consequences of mediated gay men's dating

The social consequences of GDAs and mediated dating have been critiqued and discussed by academics from three perspectives. Informed by the modern social and political theory that the rise of the technical object should be held responsible for the demise of sociability and community, one critique is about GDA's role in promoting 'no-strings' or 'commitment-free' sexual encounters among gay men. Brought about by the anonymity of GDAs, the sociability and the friendly atmosphere can be counterbalanced by the reducing obligations and accelerated interactions between users (Davis, Flowers, Lorimer, Oakland, & Frankis, 2016). This accelerated relationship that prioritises sex as a principal mechanism for connection, as shown by Yeo and Fung (2017), may lead to frustration of users who hope to seek romantic relationships and friendships. The other critique concerns the decline of the 'gay community'. In Holt's work (2011), for example, participants in Sydney express the themes that the cohesive and bonded gay community in the past is disappearing and there is a lack of a social environment where they can build durable and supportive relationships with others. The passing of an inclusive and cohesive community is also manifested through the dominant gender norms existing among gay men. Rodriguez, Huemmer and Blumell (2016) argue that, within GDA-mediated community, the domination of masculinity still exists, reproducing a masculine gay elite who is dominantly white, young, fit and healthy.

Compared to these studies framing GDAs as the factor for the rise of casual sex encounters and the demise of the gay community, other writers take a mild- and macro- critique position.

Reminding not simply complaining about GDAs, Race conceives GDAs as the 'infrastructures of intimacy and sex' (Race, 2014: 507) and calls for critical intervention on how the material technologies facilitate erotic encounters, and the qualities and limitations of the way the digital devices arrange sex, intimacy and sexual community (Race, 2014). For instance, unlike a gay bar or gay public bathroom, GDAs enable gay men to disclose themselves anonymously before sexual encounters, giving them more control and trustworthiness in the interactions (Albury & Byron, 2016). Also, Race (2014) argues that new relationships and meanings can be formed when two gay men's sexual encounters are recurring but without romantic relational commitment. Indeed, the notion of 'sexual infrastructure' offers a starting point to investigate how dating apps reorganise gay men's sexual life and social relations.

Nevertheless, framing GDAs as an infrastructure of the sexual encounter tends to ignore the differences in how different individuals actually experience the transformation of sexual life and the reformation of sexual relations. As Eubanks pointed out, 'we are inhabiting the new regime of digital data, but we don't all experience it in the same way' (Eubanks, 2017: 5). Similarly, the fitting of data process into the gay men's sexual life, or the ordering of gay sexual relation via data process, might favour some but hinder others. Combined with Fourcade and Healy's (2013) notion of 'classification situation', this study is informed to investigate *whether* the gay men on dating apps inhabit a 'classification situation' where they are classified into different groups with different 'life chances' about dating and mating; and *whether* such classification of 'life-chances' is carved or inscribed into the forming of sexual interaction order. In this regard, Green's sexual field approach provides a useful theoretical tool.

Sexual sociality and sexual field

Before reviewing Green's 'sexual field approach', this section begins with a brief note on 'sexual sociality', a term that has been used earlier. This term 'sociality' is often used interchangeably with 'social relations' and 'social interaction', but the full implications of what sociality actually is, and how the concept might most profitably be used are often left obscure. Based on Strathern and Toren's (1990) work, Long conceives sociality as a product of either 'social relations' or 'social interaction' and conceptualises human sociality as 'a dynamic

relational matrix within which human subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, continually plastic and malleable, and through which they come to know the world they live in and find their purpose and meaning within it' (Long, 2012: 41). Distinguished from the concepts like 'social structure' and 'patterns of social relations', the concept of sociality emphasises 'a dynamic social process' in which any person is inevitably engaged, rather than 'a set of rules or customs or structures or even meanings that exists as a system independently of the individual who is to be socialised' (Strathern *et al.*, 1990, cited as Long, 2012: 41).

Built on Long's (2012) notion of sociality, sexual sociality can be understood as a dynamic relational matrix within which human subjects are sexually interacting, and through which they make sense of the erotic world and the notions regarding sexuality. Much of current literature in the field has emphasised the importance of space in the forming of sexual sociality. As stated by Green, Follert, Osterlund and Paqun, the ways space is generative of sexualities is akin to the cultivating properties of language, history, law and culture because 'the space frames experience, organises proximities and distances, allocate or denies opportunities for practice and possesses symbolic properties that are heavily communicative of function and sociality' (Green *et al.*, 2008: 11). In other words, sexual sociality is not formed in a vacuum but relies on particular mediums including physical locations or virtual spaces where sexual interaction can take place, such as bars, nightclubs, bathhouses, chatrooms and dating sites and certainly, dating apps, which this study focuses on.

Since human dynamic matrix are always inscribed with inequalities of resources and capacity, the notion of sexual sociality also contains both ethical and political dimensions (Long, 2012). These dimensions are noted by some research on the sexual hierarchy of dating and mating, particularly in the context of urban gay communities, within the large body of literature of modern sexual life. Green's (2008/2011) 'sexual field approach' built on Bourdieu's theory of practise as well as Goffmanian social psychology makes a valuable contribution in this respect. The sexual field can be perceived as a 'socially stratified, institutionalised matrix of relations' which is expressed in the historically specific sexual habitus and resulting in a structure of

desire, the currencies of sexual capital and a status order regarding sexual attractiveness (Green, 2008: 28). According to Green (2008), the encounter and accumulation of similar sexual preferences and erotic desire produce 'the structure of desire'. This desire structure is expressed through 'sign-equipment' of sexual sites (e.g., the name of a nightclub and the fashions, posture and body look of the patrons), on one hand, and produces the hegemonic currencies of sexual capital which in turn shape the sexual stratification in the field, on the other (Green, 2008).

The institutional dimension of gay sexual sociality i.e. sexual stratification process revealed by the 'sexual field approach' has significant implications on this study which aims to explore the ordering of gay sexual sociality in an era of datafication. Green (2011) identifies six interactional processes underpinning sexual stratification, which can be subsumed into three main phases: 1) *recognising* the site of sexual sociality as a space like erotic market and a field shaped by structure of desire; 2) being classified into a sexual hierarchy by *comparing* one's sexual capital with others and with the hegemonic one; 3) *gaming* the sexual hierarchy through reflexive self-presentation and strategic sociability. For Martin and George (2006), the sexual stratification should be conceived as 'a problem of order' to be explored. Drawn on Bourdieusian triad – field, capital and habitus, Martin *et al.* pointed out, in the sexual field the 'hegemonic systems of judgment related to desirability produce a status order that creates differential probabilities for partnering across individuals' (Martin *et al.*, 2006: 247). Taken together, it is within the three interactional processes (i.e., recognising, comparing and gaming operating within the sexual field) that what Martin *et al.* (2006) call a 'status order' regarding sexual attractiveness is formed as part of a broader social order, and that the sexual actors are assigned different chances for dating and mating based on their positions within the status hierarchy.

As mentioned earlier, this study asks what sexual implications that the ordering of sexual sociality via datafication has for gay men. Specifically, it aims to investigate whether the gay men on dating apps are inhabited in a what Fourcade *et al.* (2013) calls as 'classification situation' that creates differential life chances regarding dating and mating across individuals.

Green's (2008/2011) and Martin's *et al.* (2006) arguments above provide a theoretical response to the questions while also direct this study to probe into: how gay men recognise the structure of desire embedded in dating apps, how they are classified to a sexual hierarchy, and how they game the hierarchy. By providing empirical evidence for these questions, this study will answer how the ordering of sexual sociality through datafication may create different dating and mating opportunities across gay men.

Literature Conclusion and Conceptual Framework

This study aims to explore what consequences that 'datafied dating' has on gay men's social relations. By reviewing the literature on 'datafied dating', 'consequences of datafication' and 'sexual sociality', this study has identified several shortcomings in the current relevant literature but also drawn theoretical insights from these works which lead to the research questions of this study. While the technological mechanism particularly the reconfiguration of dating apps as artefacts driven by data technologies is understudied in current research on GDAs, the affordance notion and mediation framework that previous studies are often drawn upon inform this study largely. Gay men's dating reconfigured by data technologies consists of two aspects. For one, the data process and structure (i.e. datafication) can be embodied by affordances of GDAs; for another, gay men users may actively experience and perceive the data process and structure in their everyday dating life. Making sense of the social consequences of datafied dating requires an investigation in detail on the above two aspects.

Secondly, inspired by Albury's (2017) concept of 'data culture' and Bourdieusian practice theory, the social consequences of datafied dating can be conceived as a social structure, or a broader social order, that emerges from and is reproduced in users' data practices (i.e. data production and use based on the technical structure of GDA). As data practice can be understood as a classification practice, and it is through the classification system that data process fits into the forming of social order (Bowker & Star, 1999; Couldry, 2003). Therefore, this study of the social consequences of datafied dating requires understanding how datafication of dating is built from gay men's classification practices on dating apps, and how gay men's interactions with dating apps' classification systems shape the sexual interaction

order. On the other, the notion of 'classification situation' (Fourcade & Healy, 2013) has informed this study to further investigate whether and how the ordering of gay sexual interaction through datafication may implicate a certain form of inequality regarding the distribution of chances. Answering these questions will fill the gaps in the current literature on GDAs with regards to the meso-level dynamics between the data structure of GDAs and the dating practices of gay men users as well as with corresponding social implications of such dynamics (Wu, 2017)

The potential inequality institutionalised in online gay social space leads this study to review the literature on the social consequences of GDAs. This chapter has identified the moral risk of ignoring individual differences in experiencing the reformation of sexual relations in the current literature defining GDAs as an 'infrastructure for sexual interaction'(Race, 2014). Based on Green's (2008/2011), sexual field approach, this chapter reveals that institutionalised inequality in gay men's online sexual sociality is primarily reflected in a 'sexual stratification' which is underpinned by three interactional processes regarding desire structure and sexual capital. Since the sexual stratification is insofar the 'problem of order' of gay sexual sociality (Martin *et al.* 2006), the 'ordering of gay sexual sociality via datafication' is based on how GDA users recognise desire structures, compare sexual capital and game sexual hierarchy, by which the sexual stratification is formed and the users are classified into this status order with different opportunities for dating and mating.

Research Question

To conclude the literature, this study assumes the social consequences of datafied dating for gay men as the 'ordering of gay sexual sociality through datafication' or 'gay sexuality ordered via data process' which constitutes the conceptual framework for later empirical research. On this basis, the empirical part of this study will focus on the case of Blued, the Chinese largest gay dating app, aiming to answer the following research question:

How the gay sexual sociality on Blued is ordered via data process and structure i.e. datafication?

This research question can be broken down as follows: how the data process and structure (i.e. datafication) are embodied by affordances of Blued characterised by classification systems? How Blued users may actively experience and perceive datafication through their classification practices in their everyday dating lives? And how the users' interactions with (e.g., think about, conceptualise and possibly adapt to) Blued's classification systems shape a status order of sexual attractiveness that leads to different chances of dating and sexual engagement across users?

Exploring the role of data in ordering gay sexual sociality on the foundation of existing research and theories, this study will contribute to the literature of relevant fields in several ways. First, it will shed light on the gay dating apps' technological attributes allowing for more intensive datafication, which is largely understudied by the current literature. Second, it will grasp the meso-level dynamics between the data structure of GDAs and the dating practices of gay men and enrich the notion of 'data culture' on dating apps (Albury *et al.*, 2017). Lastly, it will further develop Green's (2008/2011) sexual field framework by providing evidence about novel aspects of gay online interaction as well as contribute to the broader academic debates on social consequences of GDAs.

METHODOLOGY

To address these research questions, this study design included a mix of approaches that combine the 'walk-through' method and 8 qualitative semi-structural interviews. The interview data are processed through thematic analysis. Considering the interactional processes underpinning sexual stratification identified by Green (2011) – recognising, classifying and gaming – are mainly manifested through gay men users' self-presentation and interaction filtering practices, hence, the empirical part of this study focused on two basic functions of Blued: profile creation and browse filter.

Walk-through Method

This research is firstly interested in the way in which the data process is embodied in Blued's affordances characterised by classification systems. Put it differently, I hope to identify how Blued users and their actions can potentially be converted into computer-recognisable units and what cultural references can be potentially suggested by the data process. Built on scholarship in cultural studies and STS, the 'walkthrough method' (Light *et al.*, 2016) offers a systematic approach to cover both aspects. This method asks the researcher to engage directly with an app's interface and function to examine its technological mechanism and embedded references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences (Light *et al.*, 2016). Also, this method can illuminate the material traces of designers' intentions, and critically examine the workings of an app as a socio-technical artefact (Light *et al.*, 2016). In this study, through detailed observation and documentation of Blued's interface and functions regarding profile creation and browse filter, the walk-through method can shed light on **the users' potential actions invited by Blued's affordances, the underlying data process and the potential sexual references.** This can also be a foundation for further 'user-centric research' that can identify how users actually experience Blued's data process as well as interpret its sexual implications regarding attractiveness.

Interview

The main interest of this study is in how Blued users may actively experience, perceive and interpret datafication through their classification practices in their everyday dating life, with a focus on the ordering of gay sexual interactions. Keeping in mind the idea that understanding the social consequences of datafication should avoid falling into the essentialist generalisations which overshadow the contexts of users and their media practices (Couldry, 2004; Livingstone, 2019), this study is open to data about Blued users' everyday experiences with datafication, i.e., the users' productive work through and around datafied dating. In this study, these data were collected via qualitative interview as it can uncover the meanings that underpin people's lives, routines, behaviours and feelings (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). As Patton (2014) suggest, the purpose of the interview is to understand the sense-making process of

respondents and their lifeworld. Despite partly involving Blued users' usage routines, this study is not aimed to reveal the objective pattern behind their behaviours, but to understand how they actually perform 'invited' classifying actions such as tagging and filtering, how they attribute meanings and values to these classification systems and their classification practices, as well as how they construct and narrates the implications of datafication and classification on their sexual interaction order. The interview in this study was conducted in a semi-structural form to leave more space for the unexpected ideas arising from the conversation with respondents, thus expanding the perspectives for subsequent analysis.

Sampling and recruitment

This study follows Robinson's (2013) four-point method of sampling in qualitative research. The 'sample universe' is defined as the Blued users in view of the focus of this study on this particular gay dating and social networking application. As for the size of the sample, Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) suggest that 3-16 participants would be a suitable range for the interview with an idiographic aim. After initial communication, a total of 25 users expressed a potential willingness to be interviewed. Based on the later sampling strategy and further communication, a total of 8 users were enrolled in the study as participants. To select a sample, the stratified sampling strategy was adopted by this study (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2017), which was based on the age distribution of users from the market reports launched by Blue itself. The recent report reveals that nearly half of Blued users (49.8%) are 18-25, while 39.6% and 10.6% are between 26-35 years old and over 36 years old respectively (Blued, 2016). Therefore, this study recruited 4 users from 18-25 year-old group, 3 from 26-35 year-old group and 1 from over-36 year-old group.

Due to Blued's location-based browsing logic, during the last step of sourcing qualified respondents, this study employed a site sampling strategy and online advertising to recruit participants. Specifically, first I registered a new Blued account, instead of using my own account, and put the research information (e.g., topic and aim) to the new one's profile, inviting anyone who showed interest to direct message me. Then I subscribed to the membership service and 'moved' myself from London to Beijing, Guangzhou, Nanjing and

Jinan, which, according to the report (2016), were provincial capital cities in the top four provinces in China in terms of Blued users. Given the potential location bias in the pilot study, I carefully considered the links to other socioeconomic information implied by the choice of specific roaming locations within each city in this study (e.g., university – students/researcher – well-educated). For each cities, I positioned myself in the commercial, university, industrial and residential areas of each city to reach respondents whose socioeconomic characteristics were as diverse as possible (Banaji, 2006). Taking into account the age distribution of Blued users and including as many respondents of different socio-economic statuses as possible, a total of 8 respondents were recruited for this study.

Designing interview topic guide

The interview guides revised after the pilot study covered three thematic levels. The first level concerned how the respondents actually interact with Blued's classification systems to build sexual attractiveness and screen interactions. The respondents were guided to talk about, for instance, how they used the systematic default options such as tags and filter items afforded by Blued to create profiles and improve browsing efficiency, and how they dealt with the situation when the systematic default options do not meet their requirements. The second level of questions was about how the respondents perceived the nature and effects of their classification practices in creating profiles and screening interactions, associated with disadvantages to specific users. Users were led to talk about how they feel about the functionality, benefits or concerns regarding employing systematic default tags and items to present themselves and filter interactions. The third level involves respondents' interaction processes underpinning sexual stratification within Blued. This bound of questions guided respondents to reflect and narrate, such as, whether and how they observe and experience a form of dominant sexual desirability, whether and how the dominant attractiveness influence their self-presentation, dating and mating online, and what they did with such dominant sexual attractiveness using affordances by Blued. In order to facilitate the interviewees' recollection of their own experiences and ensure a natural flow of conversations, I spread the questions on these three dimensions under the two main interview topics on profile creation

and filtered browsing – with which the interviewees were familiar, i.e., the three topics were discussed in the respondents' everyday contexts of datafied dating. Also, the conversations were facilitated in an open-ended manner with follow-up questions which allow respondents to further elaborate their narratives. To create a safe and friendly conversation atmosphere, warm-up conversations and demographic data collections were conducted at the beginning and the end of the interview respectively.

Coding and analysis

All interviews were firstly audio-recorded and transcribed, and then coded and analysed using thematic analysis. This study employed a combination of inductive and deductive analysis to identify themes and patterns in the data, thus balancing 'the theoretical interests guiding the research questions' with 'salient issues emerging from the texts themselves' (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Attride-Stirling, 2001: 390). Put it differently, main themes were drawn from the literature conclusion and conceptual framework, functioning as the basic structure for responding to the research questions, while subthemes mainly emerged from the interview data which were segmented and categorised according to the relevant theoretical concepts through 'reading and re-reading of the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 87). In this way, four sub-themes were elicited from the qualitative data and subsumed into two main themes which were about the relationship of datafied dating to the notion of classification (Bowker & Star, 1999; Couldry, 2003; Fourcade & Healy, 2013) and to the notion of sexual stratification (Green, 2008, 2011; Martin & George, 2006) respectively.

Ethics and Reflexivity

The knowledge that 'interviewer and interviewee are always connected by a social location or habitus' reminds me of reflecting on my roles throughout the interviews (Plummer *et al.*, 2001: 2). On the one hand, this study addressed some of the reflexivity issues that emerged in the pilot study. First, in this study, I re-registered a new account instead of using my private accounts to post recruiting advertisements, with no real photos uploaded as an avatar. I sent the photos through private chat only when the interested potential respondents requested a

'photo exchange'. This is consistent with the user tradition of Blued in China while minimizing the influence of my personal factors on the demographic attributes and motivations of potential participants. Second, my dual identities as both a Blued user and as a researcher from the critical media studies make the reflexivity more complicated and necessary. The overlap of these two experiences and identities may have led me to rationalize and generalize some of my stereotypes and even prejudices about dating apps and the Chinese gay male community through constructing theoretical discourses, thus affecting my understanding of the literature, my interpretation of the conceptual framework, and my interpretation of the collected data. To address this issue, I consciously balanced my review of the literature with arguments against framing dating apps as the hook-up app (e.g., Race, 2014), which guided me to understand the social consequences of dating apps from a more macro-perspective of social relations and order.

On the other hand, my reflexivity in this study is mainly related to the issue of boundaries between myself and my respondents. Although four respondents ended the interview by stating that they themselves had gained new perspectives or reflections on dating apps and the gay community through their conversations with me, I was acutely aware of the time costs, energy costs, and possible risks that this conversation might imply for them. Therefore, I maintained a daily interaction with each interviewee for two weeks before and after the formal interview if they wanted, in order to establish a supportive and trusting dialogue environment. However, this also caused me problems with boundary issues. For example, one of the interviewees asked me what I thought and felt about him before the interview formally began. While acknowledging that explicit self-exposure could be risky for both the study and myself, I answered his question briefly, implicitly, and as a friend to gain his trust and make him feel safe to explore his deepest feelings and thoughts in the interview. But it also made me reflect on the nature of the relationship between the interviewee and me. What substantive benefit could he gain from this interview when I answered his questions in order to make him better able to cooperate with my interview?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the main findings from my 'walk-through' on Blued and the interviews with 8 gay men users, with some discussions by connecting the findings with the current literature and the research question.

Datafication on Blued: Classified Self and Others

A newly registered user is firstly required to complete a series of basic information, such as nickname, avatar, date of birth, height and weight (either in cm/kg or ft/lb), sex roles (including *top, vers top, versus, versus bottom* and *others*) as well as health status. The next page affords users a set of tags to disclose their body figure, personality, hobbies and preferred genre of entertainment. Specifically, each user is allowed to pick up only one from 4 body tags, namely, *hou* (twink), *yunchen* (average), *xiong* (bear) and *jirou* (muscular); and can select up to 5 personality tags from 11 including *stylish, sunny, mature, bossy, introverted, adorable, artistic, warm, experienced, otaku* and *honest*. Then users are directed to use the body tags and personality tags above to describe the 'ideal type' they are looking for. When the account is initially set up, users can add more information to their personal homepage including a text headline of up to 256 characters (named as 'about me'), relationship status (including *'do not show', 'single', 'dating', 'partnered', 'exclusive', 'engaged', 'married'* and *'open relationship'*), goals (named as *'looking for', including 'chat', 'date', 'friend', 'boyfriend'* and *'gym buddy'*), hometown, industry and blood type. These subjects plus the subsumed systematic default options constitute what Mejias and Couldry (2020) call as 'mechanism of data collection' which are embedded in social media by developers based on industry practices and institutionalised routines. This data collection mechanism works by guiding and encouraging users to represent their attributes and preference in the form of numeric numbers and non-numeric tags pre-set in the app. In this sense, users' self-presentation on Blued becomes practices of categorisation and classification, whereby each individual is reduced to and represented as standard data units recognisable by the computer, resonating with Lupton's 'quantified self' (Lupton, 2016: 5). Thus, one's first impression of Blued is often constructed from this structured set of numbers and tags.

These standard data units not only have a representational function (i.e., the medium for self-presentation) but can also be acted upon for browsing and filtering. The information voluntarily provided to Blued by users forms a rich and extensive database that is structuralised by multiple dimensions and offers access to every user. The affordance to access the portal is the 'filter' button in the top right corner of Blued's browsing page. Blued's filter function so far consists of 15 subjects each of which contains several data items. For instance, through setting values and tag ranges for sex role, age, height, weight, body and personality of the browsed, one can exclude those whom he does not like, thus narrowing the browsing range. Through the mechanism of data collection manifested as profile, users and their preferences are tweaked into fixed data standards, protocols and formats that are compatible with the computing grammar so as to be calculated and manipulated, which is referred to as 'calculable person' by Lupton and Williamson (2017). In this sense, Blued users can shape their own algorithmic formation through combining different filter items, which in turn exerts influence on other users (e.g. reducing visibility), by which other users as subjects are transformed into calculable data objects. In other words, Blued's filter affordance renders user data more easily computed and manipulated, which may influence the 'sense of self, social relationships and life chances' of the users represented by these data (Lupton, 2016).

Classification Practices on Blued: Data Culture of Dating

One of the preconditions of datafication is the fitting between social worlds with computing grammars, i.e., classifying attributes, behaviours and meanings of humans into computer-recognisable data units (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Therefore, Blued users' everyday data practices (i.e. data production and use) can be seen as classification practices, or say interaction with classification systems. Based on this assumption, this section presents two sub-themes emerging from the interview regarding how the respondents actually interact with Blued's classification systems to build sexual attractiveness and filter interactions.

Interactions with classification systems

Blued users create profiles and browse others through classification practices. These classification systems include not only the more easily measured numerical categories of age, height and weight, but also sex roles, body figure, personality and dating goals, etc. which are made up of label categories expressing certain meaning. It often takes more effort for users to fit their conditions into the corresponding categories of the latter classification systems. *Referencing, resisting* and *negotiating* are three common strategies that Blued users take in their classification practices. Taking self-categorisation regarding sex roles as an example, a narrative pattern identified from the interviews was *referencing*, such as relating one's sex-role category to body and personality characteristics. Interviewee 1 associated his sex role as 'top' with his 'muscular body' and 'relatively good stature'; while interviewee 2 identified his role as 'top' because he felt he was 'more willing to take care of and protect others' in a relationship. However, Blued's intention of categorisation of personality is resisted by two interviewees who did not select any personality tags in their profile.

> […] Labelling itself is a process of 'narrowing people'. (Interview 3)

> […] I'm not even sure myself what kind of personality I have. […] different people
> see a person in different ways. […] people are three-dimensional. (Interview 4)

Negotiation as another classification strategy can be seen as a complement and amendment to the classification system, which is often employed by users when their certain characteristics can neither be fitted into any category nor be represented by existing classification systems. Interviewee 3 illustrated how the textual headline function of Blued profile afforded him to negotiate with the fixed classification system regarding sex role and assisted his self-presentation and social interaction.

> [...] Because I'm a bit of a softer kind of person, so at first I would think I was a 0;
> then I thought it was hard to be a 0; it wasn't very pleasurable in terms of, you know,
> making love, so I didn't particularly like being a 0. [...] So I chose 0.5 for a number

of years, because at the time there were only three options on Blued – 1, 0 and 0.5 – but I didn't write 0.5 to say I could do all of them, but to say I was 'not sure'. [...] But then for a while I saw someone on the app write something like 'no 1/0' in the textual headline, and I thought I did not have to choose between 1 or 0, either. [...] I think Blued gave an option for 'other' sex role at the time, so I changed it to 'other' and put 'no 1/0' on my headline.(Interviewee 3)[1]

Using filters to browse others can also be viewed as a classification practice. In addition to adding the basic filter items afforded by Blued such as age, height, weight and figure type, respondents also adopted a negotiation strategy to expand the effects of filtering. Interviewee 1 described how he used the textual headline to enhance the effectiveness of the system's own filter function.

[…] You can set 'photo only' in the in-built browse filter to see those users with real photos. […] My textual headline says NPNC, which means No pic no chat. […] By doing this, I am trying to say that I only want to interact with people who have photos (Interviewee 1)

According to Albury's *et al.* (2017) 'data culture of production' and 'data culture of use', Blued users' classification practices based on the app's various affordances are essentially a series of interactions and play with the app designers' intentions of datafication, which is manifested through users' adaptation, negotiation and resistance strategies when encountering the classification and datafication systems. In the course of such adaptation and gamification, on one hand, a large body of data of three types is produced part of which constitutes Blued's database. Specifically, numeric data is generated when users are classified into datasets of height, weight, distance and age datasets, while categoric data is produced through users' reflexive self-categorisation practices regarding personality, figure type, dating goals and even sex roles. Also, users' headline messages are also 'textual data' not yet fully structuralised,

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[1] In Chinese internet, gay men often use '0' to refer to 'bottoms', '1' to 'tops' and '0.5' to refer to 'verses'.

stored and analysed. On the other, the numeric and categoric data are restructured to fit into action grammars of algorithms thus can be utilised, acted upon and computed (Agre, 1994). As affordance structure and interface design are often the manifestation of app designers' institutional knowledge as well as the ideology that the app serves (Albury *et al.*, 2017), the data generated through Blued's classification systems may thus reflect a certain culture, which in turn shapes users' identities within and experiences of the online dating. This aspect of implications is elaborated with more empirical evidence in the later section (4.3).

Classification as a normative force

Blued's classification system, manifested as various affordances, function as a tool to assist users' self-presentation and as a framework to narrow their browsing. While often faced with situations that classification systems do not apply thus requiring negotiating and resisting strategies, most respondents described the systems with the words like 'efficiency', 'targeting' and 'match'. For example, interviewee 5 felt that the 'figure type' tags and 'dating goal' tags in profile gave an 'at a glance' indication in terms of whom and what he is looking for. Similarly, interviewee 2 saw the numerical tags of 'age, height and weight' as a filtering mechanism to help assess whether a person meets his expectations before initiating a chat. While an interviewee was concerned about the risk of 'missing out ideal partners' due to the overly detailed self-categorisation and multiple filtering criteria, 5 of 8 respondents had profiles with an over-70% completed profile[1], and 8 of them set at least one filtering criteria. Interviewee 7 saw this kind of active adaptation to the classification system, either self-categorisation (e.g., self-presentation) or categorising others (browse filter), as an instrument to better build attractiveness and enhance interaction efficiency.

> […] Since there's a number there I would think about filling it out to 100%. [...] I think the platform has designed so many tags for you to fill in because they want the users to be able to make better friends and find their true love. [...] And you think

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[1] At the top of the Blued profile page, there is a percentage number indicating the level of completeness of the user's profile.

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> it's true that only by providing as much information about yourself as possible to others can they know what kind of person you are, including whether they themselves are the person you're looking for. (Interview 7)

However, this idea was not supported and agreed with interviewee 4 who works as a programmer. Interviewee 4 questioned the intentions behind such categorisation and datafication.

> [...] What is the company trying to do by designing so many features for you to fill in your personal information. [...] Actually, we all know its purpose in our minds. But the question is whether it (collecting information) has brought you convenience? In many cases, the app collects so much information about you and asks you to fill in so many characteristics and conditions about yourself, but it doesn't bring you convenience; […] in many cases it just asks you for this data. (Interviewee 4)

Viewing collecting and displaying user information to better partnering and dating as a benefit offered by the platform demonstrates the extension of 'algorithmic culture' into the field of human's affective, sexual and intimate interaction. Algorithmic culture can be understood as the rhetoric around big data and algorithm technologies that works to naturalise and normalise datafication and dataveillance, inculcating the belief that data is collected and processed for convenience and benefit (Striphas, 2015; Couldry & Yu, 2018). Influenced by the algorithmic culture, it becomes acceptable and legitimised to offer personal data to the platform by categorising oneself into numbers or tags and to utilise the data oneself offered to shape algorithmic formation and optimise the browsing outcomes. In other words, Blued's classification systems and the users' adaptive classification practices are framed as a neutral and natural means to 'achieving benefits and empowerment' from dating technologies (Couldry & Yu, 2018). In this sense, the self-categorisation (e.g., completing structural profile) and categorising others (e.g., setting filtering criteria) in line with the app designers' intentions thus become a normative force, driven by which 'a new digital subject' is produced who is individually responsible for gaining the chances and benefits that data offer (Couldry & Yu,

2018). The implication of this neoliberal framework on gay sociality on Blued is that the individual gay man should take the responsibility for his own visibility and interaction opportunities, and the invisibility and the declining of social chances are insofar attributed to personal failure regarding self-presentation and interaction strategies. The moral-political dimensions of the classification practices and underlying datafication process on Blued are obscured and disguised by the discourses namely 'personal preference' and 'efficiency'.

Hierarchisation of Blued: a data-based sexual order

Blued constitutes a virtual space where gay men can form social relations based on affective and sexual interactions, and can therefore be seen as sites of gay sexual sociality. According to Green's (2008/2011), the virtual site of sexual sociality embodies a field that designates a matrix of relations with structural features. Built on his theories and concepts, this section presents how respondents construct meanings of sexual attractiveness in the course of interacting with classification systems that facilitate datafication. Two themes emerging from the interviews are 'perceiving the structure of desire' and 'reproducing and resisting sexual hierarchy'.

Perceiving and imaging structure of desire

Revolving around users' classification practices, a subculture marked and segmented by physical and socioeconomic characteristics namely age, height, weight, figure type and class is constantly experienced by users. From interviews, the respondents reported that they found specific categories of gay men on Blued more sexually attractive than others.

> […] Then you find those people who are white (and) muscular on the app, it's easy
> for him to get a date or hook-up. […] And I find that people who take the initiative
> to ask people if they want to date or hook up are usually pretty good in body and
> looks as well. (Interviewee 4)

> […] Actually, to put it bluntly, it's all about how good you look. […] You see those
> gays whose profile pictures looking young and having a good body, good skin and
> very defined features, he must have a particularly high number of followers.[…]

> And now Blued has also come out with a function to send gifts, then you will see
> these people must receive relatively more gifts. (Interviewee 3)

Respondents' narratives can be interpreted with Green's (2011) argument that space of sexual subculture is subsumed into a sexual field when patterns in 'hook-up' apparently and systematically favour certain individuals and groups than others. Based on the narratives, it can be demonstrated that respondents experienced a sexual field on Blued featured by a particular dominant desire structure. The number of followers and gifts received suggest that Blued as the site of gay sociality is not a 'democracy of desire', but a set of relations grounded on competition and sexual selection. In other words, Blued is perceived by respondents as a market space where gay men compete for dating and mating opportunities (Laumann *et al.*, 2004).

A key point that emerged from the responses is that the respondents conceived the structure of desire and the stratification of sexual attractiveness in a *typological* way. Put it differently, the distinction between 'sexually attractive' and 'non-sexually attractive' is equated with and conceived as categorical divisions such as 'young/old', 'proportionate/skinny or obese', 'good skin/poor skin' and so on, rather than differences between individual sexual actors, thus implying an 'inferential bias' of using correlations to indicate causality. In other words, the respondents tend to interpret 'the correlation between the individual sexual attractiveness and certain characteristics as that 'these characteristics determine or affect one's sexual attractiveness'. Defining sexual desirability based on categorical (e.g., body figure) or numeric differences (e.g., age and height), the respondents are internalising a norm that particular groups hold more favours than others in the field's structure of desire *because of* particular characteristics of this group. This is done by a process akin to Mead's (1997) 'generalised others' whereby actors tend to apprehend the field-specific community of attitudes towards sexual attractiveness (Green, 2011).

From the interviews, it was found that age and body size (height, weight and figure type) were the most frequently mentioned sources that 'determine' one's sexual attractiveness on Blued.

Being young, well-built and muscular, as well as being masculine, to some extent mean more sexually attractiveness.

> […] For example, if you are over 40 years old, I can't even imagine what kind of way I can meet or contact you, if you are over 40 years old, you can be an uncle or something, it's not attractive at all.[…] And I think the aesthetics and trend of this app itself are still biased towards (like) young, energetic, because more people on Blued may be trying to dating or hook up, […] being older means you do not meet the mainstream needs of this software. (Interviewee 1)

> […] According to my observation, whether people are dating or looking for a boyfriend, they like to find the kind of guy who is taller but must not be fat, preferably with muscles, and then more masculine, without a very feminine temperament. (Interviewee 6)

> […] You see the four categories distinguished by its figure type label, […] I think it largely still has a bias and hint. […] I feel it is still in accordance with a division based on sexual attractiveness, like muscle men will be more popular, and muscle men he may also be more willing to interact with muscle men. (Interviewee 2)

Besides, socioeconomic status, like education background and occupation-based class, are also important factors that affect one's sexual attractiveness. Since systematic default classification systems focus on one's physical characteristics, socioeconomic status as a form of sexual capital is mainly observed through the users' textual headlines.

> […] Maybe some people have a 'famous school complex'. Because the educational background actually reflects your cultural capital and to some extent reflects and determines your class. […] So you'll see the kind of students who graduated from prestigious institutions, tend to put the abbreviations of their institution's names on their profile. (Interviewee 2)

[…] I also see the ones who put their occupation on their profile. I see more in the finance and technology industry, for example, someone will write 'based in Lujiazui' on his profile, and although he doesn't specify which company he is working for, you can easily associate him with the probability of being in a decent job with a good salary in all aspects. (Interviewee 7)

As can be seen, on Blued, a site of sexual sociality, the structure of the sexual field is shaped by the stratification regarding sexual attractiveness. Based on categories in terms of physical characteristics and socioeconomic status, Blued users may be stratified into a hierarchy regarding sexual attractiveness. This forming process of sexual hierarchy is the result of the distribution of what Green (2008) calls the 'hegemonic currency of sexual capital'. Sexual capital affects one's partnership choice and social significance, which is generated through three dimensions of self-presentation: physical appearance, affective presentation and sociocultural styles (Green, 2008; Levine, 1998). On Blued, both physical characteristics and socioeconomic status function as sexual capital, because many users, as observed by the respondents, disclose this information as part of their profile strategies to 'elicit erotic response' in another (Hakim, 2010). On the other, the hegemonic currency of sexual capital is produced by the structure of desire imagined and interpreted by Blued users, revolving around the particular physical characteristics i.e. young, well-built and masculine and the particular socioeconomic status like well-educated and 'decent occupation' (Green, 2008).

Reproducing and resisting sexual hierarchy

This sexual hierarchy, as the result of the distribution of the hegemonic currency of sexual capital, is also reproduced and reinforced in Blued users' everyday classification practices. Interviewee 1 described how they utilised the built-in 'filter' tool on Blued's browsing function to improve browsing efficiency.

[…] I first had to screen age. […] I screened out people over 40. I also put a limit on weight, and I probably won't accept those who are too fat. But in fact, weight is

largely related to your height. 80 is the upper limit for me. […] so the minimum

standard I set for height is 175. (Interviewee 1)

Although this action of classification filtering based on 'personal preferences' may reduce the visibility of specific users (e.g., older gay men, overweight gay men), some respondents felt that this did not constitute discrimination against them in terms of database access, because 'they can still view me and initiate a chat with me' (Interviewee 2). However, the screening strategies practised by interviewee 6 may fundamentally reduce the interaction opportunities of particular groups of people.

[…] I wrote 'no MuLing' (no femme bottoms)'. Because I use Blued to make friends

and I don't want to be friends with the very girly kind of gays. (Interview 6)

This screening strategy might be framed as 'the freedom and right to express individual preference' (Interviewee 6). It is undeniable that individual sexual tastes are highly variable and idiosyncratic (Green, 2008). Nevertheless, collective sexual life at any given site of sexual sociality like Blued is organised around the structure of desire. While Blued might have a more diverse desire structure than urban gay spaces like a leather bar, users may 'inculcate an appreciation for a given structure of desire' on one hand; and the diverse individual preferences are often publicly displayed and communicated thus constituting a form of 'erotic socialisation' on the other (Hennen, 2008). Therefore, Blued is a space where an institutional dimension exists, rather than a utopian setting or a 'democracy of desire' (Green, 2011). Furthermore, from the narrative of interviewee 6, femininity as devalued sexual capital may intersect with the categorisation of sex roles, further diminishing the status of some gay men (e.g. gay men who self-identify as the tops but look feminine) in terms of sexual attractiveness. This also illustrates a replication and reinforcement of mainstream gender norms (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016).

Compared to those specialised erotic spaces offline, another specificity of Blued as a sexual field is that users can resist the imagined structure of desire and sexual hierarchy by their

classification practices. For example, interviewee 3 resisted categorising himself into any figure type but was willing to select tags regarding hobby and entertainment, the latter of which most users leave blank.

> […] I never came to Blued with the intention of hook-up. […] I came here to find friends or a relationship. But serious relationships and friendships are more about personalities and shared interests, right? I think the excessive focus on faces and bodies on Blued is mostly to do with its sexual culture. (Interviewee 3)

This sexual hierarchy championing certain physical characteristics and socioeconomic status is thought to have rendered Blued a 'hook-up app' which may favour users who are good-looking and young but do not want to develop a long-term relationship. In this sense, dating goals also constitute an important factor in shaping users' experience on Blued. Interviewee 4 described how he utilised Blued's classification system to 'subtly' resist the hierarchy that favoured those with good-looking and hook-up goals.

> […] I would use its location filter before, but I was screening out people who were too close to me. Then Blued's membership could roam to other countries, so I subscribed to a membership and then positioned myself (roaming) to Shanghai […] because this way there would be a (physical) distance (from the other person) and it would be simple to chat […] From so far away, and he couldn't hook up with me. […] If we can become friends then it must still be because of a match of personality, or our common interest. […] Looks are not so important in this process. (Interviewee 4)

This sexual hierarchy is also resisted by users with niche preferences. For example, some Blued users may express their niche preferences in their profile headline, such as 'like bears' or 'looking for dashu (middle-aged man)' which can be seen as a negotiation use of the current classification systems. Interviewee 3 interpreted it as an 'invitation' to particular groups of people and a 'resistance' against mainstream aesthetics.

Discussion

In the first section of this chapter, I walk through the various affordances of Blued, with a focus on its functions of profile creation and browse filter. Drawn on the concepts of datafication and classification (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Lupton, 2016; Lupton & Williamson, 2017) as well as the notion of 'data culture on dating apps' (Albury *et al.*, 2017), walking through Blued reveals that how datafication of dating on Blued is manifested through Blued's affordances characterised by classification systems. It is the classification systems embodied in profile affordances that translate gay men into standard data points (in the form of numeric number and non-numeric tags); the actionability and manipulability of these data points further transform gay men into 'calculable person' who can be browsed and filtered.

The second and third sections present the findings from 8 user-centric interviews. Section two ('Classification Practices on Blued: Data Culture of Dating') reveals how respondents performed and normalised their classification practices in everyday datafied dating on Blued. Three classification strategies were analysed: 1) *adaptation* by using Blued's affordances to categorise oneself and others; 2) *negotiating* with the default classification systems via supplementary textual details; and 3) *resisting* the classification systems by rejecting categorising oneself or others. The three strategies are employed by respondents to build attractiveness and better meet goals of dating and mating. Such classification practices are normalised and legitimised in the rhetoric of 'algorithmic culture' that frames self-categorisation and categorising others as neutral means to achieve benefits offered by Blued. These findings, particularly the respondents' normalisation of their classification practices (essentially data practices), complement Albury's (2017) notion of 'data culture on dating app' by introducing an analytical dimension about the moral politics regarding certain inequalities that are institutionalised by data technologies and disguised under efficiency and preference discourses.

Then the third section ('Hierarchisation of Blued: a data-based sexual order') zooms in on the inequalities institutionalised in Chinese gay's collective sexual life organised on Blued. Built on Green's (2008, 2011) sexual field framework, this section analyses how respondents

construct meanings of sexual attractiveness in the course of interacting with classification systems that facilitate datafication. According to the interviews, there is an 'imagined structure of desire' on Blued. This desire structure is produced through users' pseudo inferences about causal relationships between 'specific categories and high sexual attractiveness' and is expressed through the hegemonic currency of sexual capital represented by specific numeric (e.g., age and height), categorical (e.g., figure type) and textual data (e.g., education). Depending on one's amount of such hegemonic currencies, users are reorganised into a sexual hierarchy or a status order regarding sexual attractiveness, which is also reproduced and resisted by the users everyday datafied dating practices. Consequently, Blued users' visibility and interaction opportunities are largely dependent on their positions in the status order. These findings provide empirical evidence from the era of 'datafication of dating' for Green's (2008, 2011) sexual field approach. Green's fieldwork for his sexual field approach was mostly conducted in offline urban gay spaces like leather bars, where the structure of desire is mainly manifested through artificially designed visual 'sign-equipment' (Green, 2011: 248) and where self-presentation and social interaction were not electronically mediated. Conversely, on dating apps, especially Blued which does not target groups of gay men with specialised erotic taste, there might be not an *already* 'structure of desire' out there suggested by the platform and instantly observed by sexual actors. And the visibility and interactional chances on these platforms are much highly mediated and datafied, and thus can be manipulated and calculated. Therefore, the interviews demonstrate the usefulness of conceptual tools developed by Green (2008), but also further develop his sexual field framework by linking it to recent data processes and cultures.

CONCLUSION

Romantic and sexual encounters have always been mediated through the technology of the day. With recent developments in data technology, online dating applications have become intensive sites for data generation, algorithmic processing, and cross-platform data sharing. While much of the literature has extensively discussed the consequences of the application of data technologies to other aspects of social life, such as shopping, education, and social management, the transformative processes of social life underlying what Albury *et al.* (2017) call the 'datafication of romance' have rarely been discussed by scholars. This study sets out to explore how gay men's social life and relations are transformed in the datafication of dating. Defining the social consequences of datafied dating for gay men as the '*ordering of gay sexual sociality through datafication*' or '*gay sexual sociality ordered via data process*', this study uses Blued, the largest gay dating app in China, as an example to illustrate how this ordering process takes place in the users' everyday datafied profile creating and filter browsing.

Based on qualitative analysis, datafication of dating on Blued is built from users' classification practices including *self-categorisation* and *categorisation of others*, but they were not completely subject to the classification system when creating their profiles and filtering their browsing. *Adaptation, negotiation,* and *resistance* are three common strategies of classification practices on Blued that are perceived as helpful to build personal attractiveness and improve dating effectiveness. However, this 'algorithmic culture' that frames self-categorisation and categorisation of others as *neutral means* of accessing the benefits of dating technology may mask an institutionalised inequality regarding visibility and life chances. It is the inequality that constitutes the institutional dimension of sexual sociality ordered through datafication on Blued, manifesting itself in users being organised into *a status order regarding sexual attractiveness*, an order in which different positions imply different visibility and interaction opportunities. This status order is the result of the distribution of a hegemonic currency of sexual capital in the form of specific numerical, categorical and textual data on Blued, which arises from the imagined structure of desire and from the users' typological perception to sexual attractiveness.

To conclude, the social consequences of datafied dating for gay men (i.e., the ordering of gay men's sexuality through data) imply *a differentiation and stratification of visibility and interaction chances* that builds upon users' classification practices of themselves and others, arises directly from a status hierarchy regarding sexual attractiveness and is rationalised by algorithmic culture and efficiency discourses. A limitation of this study is the lack of quantitative methods to examine the 'correlation between certain category traits, or sexual capital, and sexual attractiveness' that emerged from respondents' narratives, even though this correlation is somewhat suggested by the word clouds about users' searching and following behaviours in Blued's (2016) published market report. Future research on the social consequences of datafied dating could draw on data mining and analysis techniques of the recent 'computational social science' paradigm to identify more patterns and regularities behind the people's behaviours and perceptions of sexual interactions. Nevertheless, applying Couldry's assertion about the role of datafication in the formation of social order to understand the process of sexual stratification and sexual sociality, this study develops the theories of 'gay sexual sociality ordered via datafication' and provides empirical evidence from the context of China. It not only provides insights into the debate on the social consequences of datafication and GDA's reformation on social relations but also provides a theoretical perspective on a more inclusive, equal and united online gay community.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE

NB: The questions listed below are just for directing the interviewing;

Not all questions will be asked to every participant

Q1: Warmup questions

When did you begin to use Blued?

How often do you open the app?

How long do you usually spend on Blued every week (every day) ?

Tell me about your general feelings / initial impression towards Blued?

Q2: Goals & motivations

Why do you use Blued? (Motivations or goals)? Do you think Blued can meet your needs?

What functions do you find most important/useful/effective to achieve your goals of using Blued?

What functions do you feel unhappy/unsatisfied with?

Q3: Self-presentation

What tags do you select to describe yourself? How do you select these tags?

Would you probably deselect some tags of characteristics that you do not hope others to see / you think are not sexually attractive? Why?

Would you tend to select the tags that fit the mainstream erotic preferences of the gay community? Why?

How do you feel the difference between these tags? Do you think some of the tags are more directed to the image of 'an attractive gay men'? Why ?

What do you think of the concept of 'dominant/mainstream erotic preference among gay men'/ 'gay men in tune with mainstream erotic attractiveness ?

Q4: Ideal Type

What tags do you select to describe your type? How do you select these tags?

What do you refer to when selecting tags of your type?

Do you think your type preference could be affected/shaped by the mainstream erotic attractiveness of gay male?

Do you think these tags can cover anyone's ideal types?

Q5: Filtering & Browsing

Did/do you use the filter function in your past/current online dating experiences? Why?

What category(s) of users do you filter out? Why?Do you think the filter function might implicate certain kind of prejudice or discrimination towards of certain category of gay users? Why?

Have you browsed and interacted with the users in the 'online page' (users displayed here are recommended by the system through algorithmically processing and matching different users' profiles). If yes, did you find that the recommended users are close to your type

If not, will you try it in future? Do you think it could be a high-efficient way for you to find your type? And if we recognise a dominate erotic attractiveness among gay male to be there (e.g., certain kind of figure, personality, class, etc.), do you think the combination of filter and algorithmic recommendation would be biased towards certain category of gay users.

Q6: Data Culture on Blued

Have you wondered why Blued encourages you to complete the profile after you registered with it? Are you happy with that?

Follow-up: when you fill and edit your profile, you are actually permitting the platform to collect, store and process your personal information and behaviour data. These data constitute the company's key assets through which the company profits and expands. Did you know that before? (If not) Would you change your attitudes and practices about data protection?

Q7: Ending Questions

Do you think you are a popular guy on Blued? How do you feel about the idea of popularity in online gay community?

How do you feel about the so-called 'community' promoted by Blued, do you have the feelings of being a member of that, and why?

Have you thought about 'being old'? What does 'being old' mean for you? Are you afraid of it?

How do you feel about 'acting like a straight man'? Why do you act so?

Do you think you can find Mr. Right or Mr. Better on the app, and why? How do you like the idea of 'right person'?

How do you think of the impacts of the continually updated functions of Blued on your online dating experiences? What does dating mean for you? Any changes before and after you use the dating apps?

(Note: Participants's occupation, region and age will be collected)

Appendix 2 - SIMPLIFED CODING FRAMEBOOK

Deduced Themes	Induced Sub-themes	Codes	Example Quotes
Classification practices on Blued	Classification strategies	Adaptation / utilising Blued's classification systems	[...] maybe I think of myself more as the one who is willing to take care of others, maybe my own perception of 1, so I prefer to label it as my own."
		Negotiation / using textual headline to assist self-presentation or screening interactions	I chose 0.5 for a number of years, because at the time there were only three options on Blued – 1, 0 and 0.5 – but I didn't write 0.5 to say I could do all of them, but to say I was "not sure". [...] But then for a while I saw someone on the app write something like "no 1/0" in the textual headline, and I thought I did not have to choose between 1 or 0, either. [...] I think Blued gave an option for 'other' sex role at the time, so I changed it to 'other' and put "no 1/0" on my headline
		Resistance / de-classification	[...] Labelling itself is a process of 'narrowing people
	Classification as a normative force	Classifying for gaining benefit	[...] And you think it's true that only by providing as much information about yourself as possible to others can they know what kind of person you are, including whether they themselves are the person you're looking for.
		Classifying for collecting data	[...] What is the company trying to do by designing so many features for you to fill in your personal information. [...] Actually, we all know it in our minds. But the question is whether it (collecting information) has brought you convenience? In many cases, the app collects so much information about you and asks you to fill in so many characteristics and conditions about yourself, but it doesn't bring you convenience; […] in many cases it just asks you for this data.
Hierarchisation of Blued	Perceiving and imaging structure of desire	Sexual subculture marked by physical appearance	[…] Then you find those people who are white (and) muscular on the app, it's easy for him to get a date or hook-up. [...] And I find that people who take the initiative to ask people if they want to date or hook up are usually pretty good in body and looks too.
		Typological intepretation about sexual attractiveness	[…] Actually, to put it bluntly, it's all about how good you look. […] You see those gays whose profile pictures look young and have a good body, good skin and very defined features, he must have a particularly high number of followers.[…] And now Blued has also come out with a function to send gifts, then these people will also receive relatively more gifts.
		Age / physical appearance	[…] According to my observation, whether people are dating or looking for a boyfriend, they like to find the kind of guy who is taller but must not be fat, preferably with muscles, and then more masculine, without a very feminine temperament.
		Socioeconomic status	[…] Maybe some people have a "famous school complex". Because the educational background actually reflects your cultural capital and to some extent reflects and determines your class. […] So you'll see the kind of students who graduated from prestigious institutions, tend to put the abbreviations of their institution's names on their profile.
	Reproducing the sexual hierarchy	Adaptation / utilising Blued's classification systems	[…] I would screen out the over 30s. Mainly because, from my own experience with these people, they are very purposeful. […] They don't want to spend too much time getting to know each other, they think it's a waste of time. […] Some of them would often come up and ask me "what are you looking for". It makes me feel so serious and I don't know how to answer. After all, it's a very relaxed environment (for me) and even if you're looking for a boyfriend, you have to start as a friend and get to know each other first. […] If you think you're compatible, you can get to know each other better, and then you can get to know each other better.
		Negotiation / using textual headline to assist self-presentation or screening interactions	[…] I wrote "no femme bottom". Because I use Blued to make friends and I don't want to be friends with the very girly kind of gays.
	Resisting the sexual hierarchy	Adaptation / utilising Blued's classification systems	[…] I would use its location filter before, but I was screening out people who were too close to me. Then Blued's membership could roam to other countries, so I subscribed to a membership and then positioned myself (roaming) to Shanghai […] because this way there would be a (physical) distance (from the other person) and it would be simpler to chat […] From so far away, and he couldn't hook up with me. […] If we can become friends then it must still be because of a personality fit, or a common interest. […] Looks are not so important in the process.
		Negotiation / using textual headline to assist self-presentation or screening interactions	[…] I've seen people write "looking for a middle-age man" or "like bear" in their profiles. I think this is partly an invitation or a hint to these people, and partly a confrontation with mainstream aesthetics
		Resistance / de-classification	[…] I didn't filter for age because I think the old ones are also very childish and the young ones are also very mature, the number of age doesn't tell you anything, it still depends on the specific person (how I feel to him)

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