

## **Digital Sexual Publics: Understanding Do-It-Yourself Gay Porn and Lived Experiences of Sexuality in China**

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This article puts forward “digital sexual publics” as an interpretive framework through which to understand do-it-yourself porn production and consumption practices that have recently proliferated on domestic and international digital platforms in China. Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 Chinese porn producers and consumers, we explore the relationship between digital media use and lived experiences of sexuality. We identify three characteristics of digital sexual publics. The first is a hybridity of media, where “old” and “new” digital technologies coexist to produce an array of sexual representations that creatively negotiate with censorship. The second is the emergence of a truly “digital” intimacy that produces flexible public spaces to embody queer desires. The third is the digital sexual publics’ ambivalent politics that at once transform sexual identities and constrain sexual imaginaries. Through these discussions, we direct attention to the situatedness of lived experiences of sexuality and advance the agenda of Asian porn studies by changing the focus from the existence and political significance of sexually explicit media to the transformations they bring to individual lives.

*Keywords: digital sexual publics, do-it-yourself gay porn, Chinese gay men, social media*

### **Theorizing the Sexual Use of Digital Media in Asia**

Since their emergence, digital technologies have been used by individuals to serve sexual needs. In the 1990s, pre-social-networking digital technologies such as instant messaging and webcamming afforded key spaces for sexual practices, including cybersex and “peep-show” pornography (Albury, 2018; Attwood, 2013; Paasonen, 2011; Senft, 2008). These mediated spaces dramatically broadened the reach of sexually explicit media, making them available to large segments of the population (Albury, 2018; Döring, 2009; McKee, Albury, & Lumby, 2002). Sexually explicit media are essential for the exploration of sexual needs and the affirmation of marginalized sexual identities for disenfranchised people (Binnie & Reavey, 2020; Poole & Milligan, 2018). Reviewing more than 30 years of scholarship on gay porn, Maddison (2017)

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suggests that gay cultures are “pornified,” with pornography offering gay men “not only homoerotic visibility, but a heritage culture and a radical aesthetic” (p. 139). Central to this trend of pornification, according to Arroyo (2016), is the claiming of public space as “an active pornographic space” (p. 83), as sexually explicit content becomes essential to gay public lives.

Notably, however, existing scholarship on the sexual use of digital media is dominated by concerns with the Euro-American contexts as *the* place of theorization and knowledge production. As Jacobs, Baudinette, and Hambleton (2020) point out, the increasing systematization of porn studies as a field is accompanied by the reinforcement of a Western canon. In other words, Euro-American understandings of pornography are “becoming increasingly axiomatic” (Jacobs et al., 2020, p. 251). Scholars have called for efforts to displace and challenge this epistemological hegemony. In the inaugural issue of *Porn Studies*, for instance, Jacobs (2014) calls for internationalizing the field by highlighting the significance of non-Western pornographies, which, as she suggests, “are not just a set of global and regional cultures to be mapped and studied, but are a tool for interrogating broader questions of technological innovation, internet politics, sexuality rights and obscenity legislation” (p. 114). In a more recent reflection on researching pornography in Asian contexts, Jacobs and colleagues (2020) invoke Kuan-hsing Chen’s (2010) theoretical intervention of “Asia as method” to argue for “center[ing] Asian knowledge in order to nuance and extend our understanding of pornographic culture” (p. 251). Following this line of research, in this article, we pay special attention to the situatedness of sexuality in a world that is both increasingly connected and fundamentally uneven. We believe in the significance of taking Asia seriously as “an imaginary anchor [...] to provide alternative horizons and perspectives” (Chen, 2010, p. 212). As Yue (2017) argues in her development of “queer Asia as method,” a sustained focus on “practices that decenter the globalized formation of ‘queer’ could initiate critical conversations that rethink the meanings of both being ‘queer’ and being ‘Asian’” (p. 21).

Recent years have seen proliferating works on the sexual use of digital media among Asia’s queer population, where governments generally impose strict restrictions on the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography. Focusing on diverse regulatory, cultural, and political contexts in mainland China, Taiwan, South Korea, and the Philippines, and probing experiences of sexuality on various digital platforms such as bullet board system (BBS), Tumblr, and Twitter, these works explore how new digital technologies enable patterns of self-expression and identity formation that challenge the heteronormative conventions embedded in traditional media institutions (Cao, 2021; Ding, 2020; Jones, 2020; Song, 2021a). Jones (2020), for instance, examines gay pornography on Tumblr in South Korea and observes how the platform offers an empowering space for sexual representation. Adopting a similar approach to study Filipino amateur gay porn on Twitter, Cao (2021) explicates how virtual spaces both enable and constrain the circulation of porn, reshaping understandings of gay masculinities and sexual politics. In the Chinese context, Ding (2020) investigates the success of the semiprofessional gay porn studio Chitu and argues for the cultural and political significance of the Chinese sexualized male body. Focusing on the paradoxical connection between Chinese live-streaming and gay porn production and consumption, Song (2021a) elucidates how China’s illiberal digital economy is central to the production of gay micro-celebrities and sexually explicit content. Taken together, these recent works eloquently argue for critical attention to a vibrant and fast-evolving landscape of sexual politics among Asia’s sexual minorities. Meanwhile, there are also notable limitations. First, these works focus heavily on the macro aspects of political economy and cultural production. As a result, how the sexual use of digital media reshapes individual everyday lives and

self-understandings are subsumed under broader claims of community building and subcultural negotiation. Second, these existing works also tend to invoke a linear-progressive outlook where new digital technologies have come to symbolize new opportunities for virtual sexual representations. While this is not untrue, the relationships between “old” and “new” technologies and between the physical and the virtual are in fact much more complex especially in Asian contexts, warranting further investigation and theorization.

To address these lacunas in current research, in this article we draw on the Chinese case to explore the relationship between the sexual use of digital media and lived experiences of sexuality. Our aim is twofold in undertaking this project: First, we wish to advance the agenda of Asian porn studies by changing the focus from the existence and political significance of sexually explicit media to the transformations they bring to individual lives. Second, by situating these lived experiences of sexuality in China’s political and cultural contexts, we also investigate how “queer cultural formations do not merely follow the vertical logics of colonial modernity” (Chiang & Wong, 2016, p. 1645). We suggest that the circulation of sexually explicit media content in China gives rise to configurations of sexual identities and politics that defy a clean, linear-progressive view that has come to define discussions of sexuality vis-à-vis digital technology.

### **Situating Digital Sexual Publics in China**

The theorization of the “public” has a long-standing tradition in feminist scholarship. Critiquing the class and gender biases of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, feminist scholars like Nancy Fraser (1990) point out that the public/private divide is a power-laden construction used to restrict what counts as legitimate public contestation. Berlant and Warner (1998) also posit powerfully that sex and sexuality are endlessly cited as “the *elsewhere* of political public discussion,” which contributes to the demonization and erasure of queer sexualities (p. 553, emphasis in original). Therefore, they accentuate the multiplicity of “publics” *in the plural*. Queer publics, Berlant and Warner (1998) argue, challenge “the official publics of opinion culture and the state” (p. 553).

While how digital technology enables public representations of sexuality among the queer population is well-documented in Euro-American contexts, for example, in the discussions of Chaturbate (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018), OnlyFans (Ryan, 2019), and Tumblr (Byron, 2019), gaining access to public digital sexual representations is very different in China. The regulation of sex and pornography has “become central forces in China’s twenty-first-century politics, in its technology and cultural policies and in its blueprints for Internet governance” (Jacobs, 2012, p. 13). The state has long adopted a “zero tolerance” approach toward pornography and regularly cracks down on platforms that provide porn material (see Song, 2021a). However, pornography has continued to survive and indeed thrive in the Chinese mediascape in creative and resilient ways (see Huang, 2017). The rise of domestically produced do-it-yourself gay pornography (henceforth DIY gay porn) is a more recent phenomenon, one closely connected to the availability of digital technology. Earlier studio productions, such as Chitu’s gay porn films, were chiefly circulated through online gay forums (BBS) and peer-to-peer (P2P) downloads (Ding, 2020). International platforms like Tumblr and later Twitter, which are more tolerant toward sexually explicit posts, constitute a key channel through which DIY gay porn content is disseminated and popularized (Wang & Ding, 2022). But to participate in these vibrant online porn communities, one must cope with censorship restrictions. As Song (2021a) documents, Chinese gay men need to habitually circumvent the Great Fire Wall (GFW)—China’s all-

encompassing censorship mechanism—to access international platforms such as Twitter. And while some porn content is made available on domestic platforms, state scrutiny means that gay men need to frequently migrate from one platform to another since such content is usually deleted soon after it is uploaded (Song, 2021a). The construction of “publics” for sexual representations in China, therefore, is premised on difficult negotiations, through which gay men playfully, creatively, and resiliently engage with censorship to open up possibilities for survival and development. As a result, these public spaces remain characteristically ephemeral and fragmented.

In proposing the term “digital sexual publics,” we advance feminist and queer scholars’ commitment to questioning the public/private divide by resituating the discussion in China’s censored environment of digital technology. Recent scholarship has yielded constructive terms to probe digital technologies’ effects on people’s experiences of desire and intimacy. Dobson, Carah, and Robards (2018), for example, demonstrate that social media increasingly shape and order people’s intimate identities, affects, and politics through commodification, technical affordances, and algorithmic structures. Directing attention to interpersonal relationships, Chan (2021) proposes “networked sexual publics” to describe how dating apps engender both a multiplicity of interactions and connections and an imagined space for shared positionality and desire (p. 119). As boyd (2014) summarizes in the U.S. context, the digital environments created by social media have four characteristics, namely persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability. In the Chinese case, these premises need to be revisited to account for the challenges and potentialities emerging from gay men’s engagement with digital technology. With “digital sexual publics,” we conceptualize an assemblage of highly fluid and flexible digital practices against the backdrop of censorship and political and legal precarity. Focusing on the transformation of the digital self vis-à-vis the sexual self, we ask: How do digital sexual publics facilitate gay men’s understanding of sexuality in an overwhelmingly heteronormative media environment? How does being a part of digital sexual publics reconfigure gay men’s understanding and practice of intimacy? And finally, what political potentials and limitations do digital sexual publics harbor?

In what follows, we present our findings in three parts after outlining the method. We start by looking at how digital sexual publics empower gay men to negotiate queer sexual literacy in China’s restrictive communication environment. We highlight the hybridity of “old” and “new” technologies, which we argue opens up multiple channels for Chinese gay men to gain sexual knowledge while coping with censorship. Then, we explore the ways in which digital sexual publics collapse conventional boundaries between the virtual and the physical, expanding and transforming digital literacy. Lastly, reflecting on the politics of digital sexual publics, we discuss how they exist between resilience and fragility, at once enabling the transformation of sexual identities and lives and constraining sexual imaginaries and politics.

### **Method**

This article uses the semi-structured in-depth interview as the method of data collection, which is advantageous for providing detailed information about research participants (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Participants were recruited through personal networks and a major Chinese gay news outlet GaySpot. An outstanding feature of the recent DIY gay porn boom in China is that both production and consumption have become decentralized, with a low threshold of entry. To account for this new characteristic, we intentionally included both producers ( $n = 5$ ) and consumers ( $n = 7$ ) of DIY gay porn to delineate a more comprehensive

picture of porn-centered activities and their implications. All participants are self-identified cisgender Chinese gay men based in mainland China, but their backgrounds vary in terms of age, educational and occupational backgrounds, and geographical location. Their experiences of engagement with porn also differ significantly, ranging from veteran DIY porn producers with 58,100 followers on Twitter to those who just started watching/producing porn. Through the experiences of this diversified sample of research participants, we seek to unpack the intertwining processes of development of the digital and sexual selves.

The interviews were carried out by the authors between January 2019 and August 2020 on WeChat, the default means of interpersonal communication in China (Harwit, 2017). Depending on participants' preferences, interviews were conducted through a combination of text messages and voice/video calls. Most voice/video calls lasted 40–90 minutes, and we also contacted participants via WeChat for follow-up questions after the interviews. The interview questions revolved around three main themes guided by our research questions:

*RQ1: How do participants use digital technologies to access sexually explicit content in China's regulated communicative environment? How does this access inform their understandings of sexuality?*

*RQ2: How does the newly available digital space reshape informants' approach to intimacy?*

*RQ3: How do informants make sense of the political implications of their porn-related activities?*

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, four ethical principles were strictly followed and implemented, which are: no harm to participants, informed consent, protected privacy, and no deception (Diener & Crandall, 1978). The whole process of research participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants' true identities were not asked and, thus, only oral informed consent was obtained. Pseudonyms encoded by the authors were given to each participant. The interviews were transcribed in Chinese and translated into English. Open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) were subsequently adopted for analysis of the interviews.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Negotiating Queer Sexual Literacy***

"Sexual literacy" is a common term in public health referring to "the knowledge and skills needed to promote and protect sexual wellness" (Herdt, 2007, p. 17). Seen predominantly as the purview of education in institutional settings, sexual literacy presumes a top-down mode of dissemination. As Herdt (2007) points out, however, the biggest obstacle to achieving sexual literacy is "moral panics," that is, perceived threats to societal values and interests that are part and parcel of stigmatization and marginalization (p. 17). In China, persistent censorship targeting homosexual content in mainstream media (Song, 2021b) and the conspicuous lack of education on sexuality in the classroom (Lyu, Shen, & Hesketh, 2020) have become major hurdles for queer people to achieve sexual literacy. Under these circumstances, sexual literacy is negotiated and acquired in flexible and creative ways. We use the term "queer sexual literacy" to describe how queer people find, share, and create information pertaining to their sexualities (see

Hardy, 2021) in digital sexual publics, which we argue constitute a key space through which queer people overcome stigmatization and achieve understandings and validation of the sexual self. Specifically, digital sexual publics enable negotiations of queer sexual literacy in two ways: First, they carve out alternative spaces outside the state-sanctioned media landscape for queer people to learn about their sexualities. Second, they are also characterized by a hybridity where “old” and “new” media formats coexist and converge to offer a wide array of sexuality-related content and information in flexible and resilient ways.

Many of our participants described their contact with sexually explicit content as the first step to learning about who they are sexually. For instance, Mai, who was 30 years old at the time of the interview, said that he knew about his sexuality as early as the age of five or six, and came out at the age of 15. However, when he was growing up, there was very little information available about his identity and sexuality. As Mai described, “For gay men living in China before the Internet, everyone was enveloped by solitude.” Echoing Mai’s experience, Egg, 23 years old, also complained about the lack of homosexuality-related content in domestic media landscape: “Under heavier and heavier regulation, there is not enough information about homosexuality . . . The domestic environment is too conservative. People can’t directly talk about sexual needs. Sex education is basically blank.”

Like many Chinese gay men, Mai and Egg resorted to unofficial channels to learn about sexuality. They would use Virtual Private Network (VPN) services to circumvent the GFW and get on Twitter, where porn materials are circulated without much restriction. The abundance of sexually explicit materials on international social media platforms broadened Chinese gay men’s outlook on sexuality. Mai shared, for example: “On Twitter, I saw people with different fetishes and preferences. I was exposed to different groups of porn producers and started to understand their feelings and lives.” Similarly, Egg also told us that watching porn “not only satisfied my sexual needs, but also provided positive help for me to understand the different categories of sex and the variety of sexuality.”

Since the ban on Tumblr’s adult content, Twitter has been favored by Chinese gay men as a de facto porn platform because of its porn-friendly policies, algorithm curation, and decentralized structure. In comparison with Pornhub, which is dominated by Euro-American porn producers, Twitter hosts a significantly larger amount of DIY porn produced by and for Chinese gay men (see Song, 2021a). And unlike OnlyFans, which requires credit cards for international payment, porn content on Twitter is mostly free, though interested viewers have the option to purchase full-length videos covertly on domestic Internet. The vibrant Chinese porn community on blocked international social media platforms bears testimony to the impact of digital sexual publics, where supposedly private issues such as sex and sexuality are increasingly publicly mediated. Such a “publicness” corresponds to Robinson’s (2014) discussion of Chinese queer cultural products as “representational visibility,” as “performance” in space, and as “an affective invocation of a shared viewing experience” (p. 69). The formation of digital sexual publics under state censorship demonstrates Chinese gay men’s creativity and resilience in sharing sexual knowledge and acquiring queer sexual literacy within virtual communities.

While social media sites such as Twitter have only recently become dominant in organizing digital sexual publics, the latter have been in existence long before the prevalence of such platforms. As Huang (2017) points out, for Chinese people, gay or straight, visiting online media for sexual materials goes hand in hand with

the advancement of digital technologies. Thus, the development of digital sexual publics not only is a story of technological evolution but also reflects a media hybridity where “older and newer media logics [. . .] overlap, intermesh, and coevolve” (Chadwick, 2013, p. 4) in gay men’s sustained cultural struggles regarding queer sexual literacy. Web portals, for example, including online forums and personal blogs, were prominent sites for people with Internet access to consume porn between the late 1990s and early 2000s. These sites facilitated sexual representations through “old” media formats. Daniel, a 25-year-old social media specialist, told us that he had been posting his “dick pics” far before the prevalence of Twitter. He was an active member of Soutong, a popular Chinese-language online gay forum established in 2003 where sexually explicit materials have been the dominant content. Daniel recalled: “At first, I found it very interesting, and I was excited to see so many people posting [their naked pictures]. I thought I could do so, too . . . Narcissistically speaking, I think my [private part] is pretty big, so I especially wanted to post [these pictures] to show off.”

Writing on the North American context, Arroyo (2016) suggests that nude imagery and porn texts continue to be important aspects of gay male public socialization. Daniel’s experiences confirm this point by illustrating the existence of various forms of digital sexual publics, many of which predate social media. The circulation of sexuality-related content in these sexual publics normalizes mediated sexual (self-)representations in China, empowering gay men to satisfy their curiosity, learn about sex, and talk about topics that they would be unlikely to discuss otherwise. Importantly, “new” technologies do not simply replace “old” ones in organizing digital sexual publics. Instead, “old” and “new” technologies coexist and interact with each other to produce varied digital spaces. Such a hybridity produces two effects: First, it offers varied digital sexual content that allows gay men to explore different aspects of their sexuality; second, diversity in media formats and platforms also enables gay men to better cope with censorship, allowing sexually explicit content to persistently spread both domestically and internationally. Xiaoyu’s experiences provide an interesting case in point. Aged 19 and freshly graduated from high school, Xiaoyu recounted his engagement with sexually explicit media and how it contributed to his exploration of sexuality:

I started watching gay porn online when I was 15. It was very easy to find this content through QQ [a domestic instant-messaging application]. I would search for chat groups with keywords such as “gay” (*tongzhi*), and there would always be porn content in these groups . . . I watched porn frequently for one or two years . . . Looking back, it was because I knew so little about gay sex, and porn was the only channel for me to learn about it . . . Later, I felt it would be bad for my health if I kept watching porn, so I turned to Boys Love novels instead.

Analyzing the connection between scrapbook and Facebook as “old” and “new” technologies, Good (2012) challenges a linear outlook of “new” technologies supplanting “old” ones by accentuating their functional, formal, social, and cultural commonalities. Notable from Xiaoyu’s case is how “old” and “new” technologies coexist to encompass a wide range of sexual representations that differ in terms of media format, immediacy, and sexual explicitness. “Old” media formats such as novels have been rejuvenated in a digital age, affording alternatives to social media platforms’ audio-visual-centered and often hardcore sexual materials. Meanwhile, the fact that sexually explicit content has become widely available on domestic platforms also shows how digital sexual publics can exist in highly flexible ways. Xiaoyu said that he did not bother to look for a VPN service and only used QQ to access porn: “There’re a lot of domestic porn materials

on QQ, for example, in group chats and file shares. You just need to know how to get to them." Older technologies such as instant messaging and P2P downloads help domestically spread porn materials posted on Twitter so that gay men can still access porn even if they do not use VPNs. In this way, media hybridity makes the boundary between domestic and international Internet more porous, allowing the continued existence of sexually explicit content long after a specific platform is blocked or goes defunct.

In short, digital sexual publics map out spaces outside the official landscape where Chinese gay men gain queer sexual literacy by accessing, producing, and exchanging information about sexuality. In the Chinese context, these spaces constitute one of the few, if not only, channels for negotiating sexual literacy. Corresponding to boyd's (2014) theorization of persistence and spreadability, digital sexual publics are enabled by creative uses of digital technologies against the backdrop of a heavily regulated Internet environment. Whereas digital sexual publics have gained prominence thanks to platformization, they have long existed before social media and should be perceived as an assemblage of "old" and "new" technologies that offer a wide variety of sexual representations and knowledges. Next, we explore how the spread of these sexual representations transforms digital intimacy.

### ***Transforming Digital Intimacy***

As we suggested earlier, the appeal of digital sexual publics lies in their publicness. Commenting on the circulation of gay porn on Tumblr in South Korea, Jones (2020) notes an aspiration among gay porn consumers to "see and hear themselves sexually represented" (p. 314). In addition to facilitating queer sexual literacy, these publicly circulated sexual representations also shape how gay porn producers and consumers do sex. Here, we focus on how the notion of "digital intimacy" is expanded and transformed to study the ways in which digital sexual publics shape lived experiences of sexuality. We use "digital intimacy" to refer to both purely virtual forms of interpersonal interactions and real-life, physical relationships mediated by digital technologies and to underline the increasing convergence between the two. In his ethnographic study of gay districts in Japan, Baudinette (2019) points out that the virtual and the physical can be co-constructive: Instead of eroding physical queer spaces, digital technologies in fact reinforce these spaces by encouraging gay men's virtual participation. In the Chinese case, while we also observe a convergence between the virtual and the physical, due to the lack of established queer public spaces, digital intimacy is negotiated at personal levels and manifested through the development of new interpersonal relationships. These relationships echo what Wei Wei (2012) has theorized as "going public" (*gongkai*), which stresses not a confrontational public announcement of one's sexuality but the tacit appropriation of public spaces to embody queer desire (p. 17). Put differently, digital sexual publics transform Chinese gay men's experiences of intimacy by both collapsing the boundaries between the virtual and the physical and enabling a range of "real-world" relationships that are otherwise impossible.

Oliver, a 29-year-old college graduate based in Guangzhou, told us that watching porn was not just motivated by loneliness or libido; more importantly, it served as a "validation of identity." He compared DIY porn content to a "tree hole" (*shudong*), a safe place to whisper and share secrets with a small group of like-minded people. Oliver's experiences echo Byron's (2019) observation that intimate sharing is generative of counter publics "in which sex, sexuality, gender, and bodies are explored in open and useful ways" (p. 19). We further argue that digital sexual publics among Chinese gay men give rise to new



intimacies characterized by a convergence between the virtual and the physical. These digital intimacies are virtual because they circulate through digital media content and foster communities and relationships in the cyberspace. In the meantime, as we will show, the physical dimension of these digital intimacies should not be overlooked as these virtual interactions not only generate “real-life” encounters and relationships but also profoundly reshape how sexuality is perceived and corporeally experienced. Such a convergence necessitates new understandings of both the scope and depth of digital intimacy.

When we asked Jacob, a 38-year-old civil servant with 58,100 followers on Twitter, about his motivation for maintaining an account that routinely posted sexually explicit content, he replied straightforwardly: “I have three intentions. First, to show off my body and gain confidence. Second, to find ‘prey’ [sexual/romantic partners] on Twitter. Third, to look for good-looking and like-minded gay friends.” Commenting on the role of digital technologies in mediating Chinese gay men’s lives, Wu and Ward (2020) observe that dating apps transform Chinese gay men’s sexual practices as casual sex becomes “relationalized,” fused with spiritual needs and romantic goals. While dating apps center on private, one-on-one communication, Jacob’s case sheds light on how social media platforms such as Twitter reshape gay men’s intimate lives in distinctly public ways. Jacob’s posts are made easily accessible through Twitter’s technical affordances: Not only does his Twitter profile provide a one-stop collection of his posts, photos, and videos, the content he produces also reaches a wide online audience through Twitter’s algorithm-curated timeline. This public circulation of sexually explicit materials engenders a range of digital intimacies. As Jacob’s experiences show, digital sexual publics attract people with diverse intentions and degrees of engagement, from casual browsing to making friends to finding sexual and romantic partners. These interactions blur the lines between friendship and sex, and between digital and physical relationships. Lucas’s experiences further demonstrate this point. Twenty-three years old and with 17,300 Twitter fans, Lucas had included a brief self-introduction in his Twitter profile and would update his locations as he traveled. When asked if hook-up was part of his intention, Lucas answered:

Yes . . . For example, if I post a new video, I’d get direct messages inviting me for sex . . . I don’t get a lot of messages, and I don’t get my hopes high. After all, Twitter is not like WeChat. People are not on it all the time. Some only get on Twitter after work. So, I don’t really care how many replies I get. I’ll just post my videos. If I get invites, then good. If I don’t, it doesn’t matter.

Lucas’s practices evoke a new configuration of digital intimacy as the distinctions between online/offline and virtual/physical become increasingly unstable, if not completely irrelevant. For people like Lucas, virtual encounters translate into physical ones. At the core of these encounters are digital platform’s technical affordances, which encompass digital dimensions such as posting sexually explicit content and initiating private chats and physical dimensions such as sharing geographical locations for potential hook-ups. This convergence between virtual and physical encounters allows gay men to transform public spaces, both digital and physical, into vessels for expressing queer desire. This approach to intimacy is significant, especially when considering China’s heteronormative policing of public spaces and silencing of queerness (see Song, 2021b). In the face of the lack of established public spaces for queer socializing, digital sexual publics provide flexible and fluid ways for gay men to build intimacy.

As an outcome of the growing reach of digital sexual publics, understandings of sexuality have been transformed as virtual representations of sex bear direct implications for how sex is approached, practiced, and experimented in real-world scenarios. Jacob, for instance, described his experiences on Twitter as a journey of self-discovery: "Through Twitter, I got to know people who shared my sexual tastes and preferences. I feel deeply that now I know more and more about sex, and have a stronger sense of self, too." These sentiments are echoed by Daniel, who just started posting sexually explicit content on Twitter and had a small following of 176 fans. Daniel revealed to us that the process of porn production allowed him to learn more about his sexuality:

When I take nude photos and videos, I would think about what makes me sexy, such as wearing white socks or certain shoes. I enjoy it a lot . . . Sometimes I would get so aroused when making sex photos or videos, that I couldn't stop myself from masturbating.

Representative of veteran and new DIY porn producers, Jacob's and Daniel's cases show how digital sexual publics afford far more than opportunities of monetization (see Wang & Ding, 2022). More fundamentally, their engagement with the virtual informs and reshapes their approach toward physical intimacy. The dynamic and dialogic relationship between the virtual and the physical point to a truly digital form that expands and deepens intimacy: It expands it by opening spaces for multiple coexisting relationships ranging from spiritual, erotic, romantic, to sexual and it deepens it through a convergence between the virtual and the physical, where sex is no longer privately practiced among individuals but instead publicly portrayed, mediated, and enjoyed. These transformations of digital intimacy point to new potentialities and limitations of digital sexual publics. We discuss these next.

### ***Between Resilience and Fragility***

In their classical essay, Berlant and Warner (1998) delineate the disruptive and transformative power of "sex in public" by drawing attention to a heteronormative spatialization of public and private lives. As they suggest, by reclaiming channels of public expressions of sexuality, queerness not only "sexualize[s] [social] relations, but also [ . . . ] use[s] them as a context for [ . . . ] intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation" (p. 558). Digital sexual publics in the Chinese context resonate with Berlant and Warner's (1998) theorization: By celebrating otherwise marginalized, if not demonized, sexualities in an unapologetically public manner, they challenge China's overwhelmingly heteronormative media culture. However, the politics that digital sexual publics engender are fundamentally ambivalent. Some of our interviewees were very conscious about the political implications of their DIY porn production practices. Jacob, for example, insisted that "sex is only the surface" of what Twitter porn stands for. A civil servant, he believed that international platforms like Twitter gave gay people an opportunity to fully express themselves. Jacob said:

Living in China is tiring. People tend not to discuss any social problems. They'd rather pretend that they don't exist. That's why I see Twitter as a symbol of people's awakening. At least there, we can say what we truly want to say and do what we truly want to do, without worrying about what parts we need to cut out when posting things.

Though apparently liberating, Jacob's vision is nevertheless a utopian one. While the affordability and ubiquity of VPN services have provided Chinese gay men the means to construct digital sexual publics on less-censored international platforms such as Twitter, the VPN services by no means exist free from regulations and interventions from the Chinese government. In July 2020, for instance, a Chinese citizen received administrative punishment for using a VPN service to watch porn (Borak, 2020). Legal actions like this reflect the Chinese government's tightening control over pornographic material in recent years (see Song, 2021a). In fact, digital sexual publics have historically existed, and continue to exist, in an environment of uncertainty. Chinese DIY porn collections have long been "fragile and easily demolished by censors" (Jacobs, 2014, p. 116). Gay online forums like Soutong often base their services outside mainland China and have to frequently change their Web address to avoid the blow from Chinese authorities. Live-streaming platforms providing sexually explicit performances, such as Peepla and GB live, were soon shut down by the government once they became influential (Jacobs, 2020).

Many of our interviewees proactively attempted to keep digital sexual publics alive by renegotiating fears of censorship and its legal repercussions. Da Mao, a 25-year-old master's graduate based in Guangzhou, told us that he specifically consulted China's criminal law after the VPN arrest, from which he concluded:

Disseminating obscene content [which is a criminal offence] is hard to define. But I don't think browsing porn on one's own or sharing it with friends falls into this category. The ones punished must have done something more, for example, selling porn for profit. So I won't stop getting on Twitter because of this.

Da Mao's response is paradoxical: While his intention is to continue consuming publicly available porn content, hence continuing to be part of digital sexual publics, his strategy of browsing porn "on one's own" betrays a privatizing tendency. This resegregation between the public and the private in digital sexual publics is a response to an overall precarious political and legal environment. While such a coping strategy for self-protection arguably compromises the political radicalness of China's digital sexual publics, it is worth noting that it also constitutes their very condition for survival. Indeed, the most common sentence found in Twitter porn producers' profiles is "*tuite gui tuite, shenghuo gui shenghuo*," meaning "what happens on Twitter, stays on Twitter." To protect themselves from social stigma and legal precarity, it is common for DIY porn producers not to show their faces. As Lucas told us, showing any identifiable body features in his videos would make him feel "uncomfortable." Evidently, the relationship between the digital self and the sexual self is much more complicated than what an empowerment thesis could capture. Whereas public digital expressions of the sexual self are embraced and celebrated and have become an indispensable part of gay lives in China, they are also carefully negotiated with and tactically managed at personal levels.

Digital sexual publics among Chinese gay men, therefore, exist between resilience and fragility. Although by defying a heteronormative silencing of queer sexualities in mainstream media culture, digital sexual publics have brought forth profound transformations of sexual identities, knowledges, and lives in empowering ways, they are nevertheless constrained by the country's political and legal restrictions that persistently produce stigmatization and marginalization. Within this context, digital sexual publics continue to exist in flexible and creative ways. The politics they engender is often ambivalent and paradoxical: While

they do make "sex in public" a possibility closer than ever, the extent to which they amount to significant challenges toward heteronormative institutions remains a question.

### Conclusion

In their pioneering work on digital queer Asia, Berry, Martin, and Yue (2003) argue that "burgeoning Queer Asia and its digital facilitation" challenge traditional Asian categories of sexuality while "indigenizing the global and producing mobile and contingent practices of self-inscription and self-identification" (p. 2). Two decades after this statement, our article advances this line of research by looking into how sexuality has coevolved with digital technologies. Focusing on how sexuality is learned, experienced, and lived in a digital age, we suggest that while digital sexual publics have always existed and developed in tandem with digital media, such a development is characterized by a multiplicity of "old" and "new" technologies, media forms, and sexual content, and engenders paradoxical politics, where the liberatory functions intertwine with inherent limitations and self-contradictions.

Although our case study was based in China, our findings bear broader implications for understanding sexual self-expressions in a digital age. First, the blurring of the lines between the physical and the virtual and the private and the public has become a hallmark of digital sexual expressions. We have argued that digital sexual publics have profoundly reshaped how intimacy is perceived and experienced, but how this transformation could change understandings of corporeality and sexuality needs further exploration. Second, our observation of a further strategic division between the public and the private in digital sexual publics in the Chinese context could inform studies of digital sexual expressions in non-liberal contexts. The paradoxical nature of digital sexual publics in China, which are at once confrontational and compliant, and resilient and fragile, speak to a larger context of Internet governance approaches, calling for further critical attention to the changing contours and politics of digital sexual expressions.

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