GAY MEN'S DIGITAL CULTURES BEYOND GAYDAR AND GRINDR: LINE USE IN THE GAY CHINESE DIASPORA OF AUSTRALIA

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Recent research on gay men's digital cultures indicates that the values and identities associated with the 'metropolitan model of homosexuality' (Sinfield, 1998) that first emerged in the 1970s centred around youthful, white, middle-class masculinity and urban, consumption-based lifestyles, are still very much embedded in the digital infrastructure of contemporary gay men's social networking services (see Light, 2007; Cassidy, 2013). Hence, interactions that might once have occurred in these sites are increasingly taking place in and across other social media, including more mainstream services such as Facebook and Instagram (see Cassidy 2013; Cassidy forthcoming). Beyond these services, and traditional sites of research in this area, such as Gaydar and Grindr, however, very little is known about the broader collection of sites and practices that shape gay men's digital cultures, as work in this field has thus far tended to focus predominantly on Western, English-language based sites and populations.

Building on the small amount of research that has sought to redress this imbalance by examining minority and non-Western gay male groups and services (see, for example, Dhoest, 2015 and McClelland, 2002), thereby placing emphasis on the important role of social, cultural and material contexts in digital media research, our work examines the use of social networking sites oriented towards Asian user groups and their role in local gay men's digital cultures in Australia. Against a background of significant levels of Chinese immigration over the past several decades (ABS, 2016)[1] we focus, in particular, on the Chinese diaspora of gay men in this context, and on key services popular amongst this demographic, such as Blued, Zank, LINE and Weibo.

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[1] http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3412.0/

The current paper, emerging from this much broader project, presents research in progress on the social chat application LINE and its use amongst the Chinese diaspora of gay men in Australia. It is based on data from an initial phase of participant observation on this site carried out in December 2015 and January 2016.

What's LINE?
LINE is an instant text and voice messenger application freely available on smartphones, tablets and personal computers with close to 700 million users in 2015. LINE was first launched in Japan in June 2011 by NHN Japan Corporation as a response to the Tohoku earthquake in March 2011, which damaged telecommunications infrastructure nationwide (Saito, 2012). Though developed in Japan, LINE has a global reach, with users from more than 13 countries (Bahk, 2015), and is particularly popular in Hong Kong, Taiwan and South East Asia. In addition to facilitating free text, voice and video calls, LINE allows users to share location information and audiovisual materials either through private conversation or on a Facebook-like timeline. Importantly for the purposes of this project, LINE also has the capacity for users to create and join groups of up to 200 people in which they can chat and share media. Group chats also have bulletin boards onto which users can post, like and comment.

Initial Findings
To study LINE use amongst the Chinese diaspora of gay men in Australia, since December 2015 we have been observing core communicative practices within the LINE group called 'Australia-NZ Common Happy Group' (*Ao Niu Tong Le Hui*) (ANZCHG). The term 'Common' (*tong* in Mandarin) here is the abbreviated expression for 'comrade' (*tongzhi*), which is a widely used reference to homosexuality in the greater Chinese-speaking world. The in-group conversation in ANZCHG is Chinese and all group members are men.

Initial observations indicate the most frequent uses of LINE in this group include:

1. Ritual practices: greetings and status updates;
2. Information seeking: about work, study, leisure and entertainment, and local culture and festivals (especially those LGBT community related) in Australia;
3. 'Prince Charming' discussions – where members share photos of men they have taken and other materials that contain what they perceive as the 'ideal man' - the majority of these are white men;
4. Networking: organizing offline meetings; finding nearby members to meet-up; discussing how to expand personal (gay) networks – friend/boyfriend search; or networking in other social media platforms (such as Grindr, WeChat).

Implications/Relevance
The above observations underline important cultural, social and material aspects of Chinese gay men's LINE use in Australia.

First, the negotiation of ethnic culture plays a crucial role in shaping ANZCHG members' LINE use and serves as a gateway to navigating Australia. That is, while in-group conversation suggests that the ideal man is white (the imagined), when it comes to

actual friendship and relationship building, group members still prefer Chinese/Asian men (cultural proximity), and the distinction between the 'imagined' and the 'actual' is made quite consciously. This apparent ethnic paradox serves as a gateway to navigating Australia, as discussion about others (white men) often functions as a platform for examining Australian lifestyles (e.g. are white men are more muscular because of their diet?). In this way, discussion about sexual desire, romance and network building becomes a crucial aspect of social learning and cultural negotiation.

Second, LINE is being treated as a cultural product by these users rather than merely a communicative tool. Routinised ritual practices, such as daily and festival greetings and constant 'status updates' about their everyday lives ('I finished work now!' or 'I sleep now') seem to suggest that members have developed emotional attachments to the group, and by extension, the service. In this sense, LINE acts a cultural product helping to define users' sense of identity, social practices, consumption behaviours and even their developing sense of (new) social values in a cultural environment that is different from the one they were born in.

Finally, LINE use amongst gay men of Chinese descent needs to be understood within the broader ecology of digital media services engaged by these men, including other more mainstream sites such as Grindr and WeChat. And, inversely, understandings of popular Western services such as Grindr, and their associated cultures and practices, must also recognize the embedded nature of niche sites such as LINE in these dynamics.

These initial findings tie our work to the conference theme by highlighting and interrogating the multiplicity of networked publics that feed into to gay men's digital culture in Australia, while placing emphasis on an understudied platform in LINE.

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