

# Transgressive Play and the Inherent Limits of Business Growth for China's LGBTQ Platforms: The Case of a Social Game in Aloha

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## Abstract

Since 2016, China's online LGBTQ platforms, such as Blued and Aloha, have been seeking to increase user acquisition and retention by introducing new functionalities to their interfaces. Although these attempts were promising at first, most of their endeavors proved unsustainable, largely due to the condition in which their businesses operate: a niche audience segment in a winner-take-all mobile market and a highly regulatory market in which LGBTQ content is often made a site for the execution of power. This article investigates the now-defunct role-playing social game *Werewolf* embedded in Aloha, one of the popular dating apps for queer men in China. By bringing together scholarship on game studies and queer media studies, it is argued that social games embedded in dating apps foster a new form of sexual sociality in which desires become increasingly gamified and intimacy networked, which are essential for queer social media to retain users. Although *Werewolf* was ultimately closed due to Aloha's budgetary controls, queer players have emerged as a promising market for their unique engagement in social games. LGBTQ platforms, however, are not the main beneficiary of the queer gaming market because of the winner-take-all mobile ecosystem. The article highlights the inherent limits of "outward" expansion of China's LGBTQ platforms into the mainstream market and suggests that prioritizing the unaddressed needs of their niche audience through an inward approach may be a more viable strategy for business growth in a mobile ecosystem dominated by a handful of major players.

## Keywords

dating app, social game, platform economy, LGBTQ, China

## Introduction

Since 2016, China's online LGBTQ platforms, such as Blued, ZANK, and Aloha (the app was rebranded as Finka due to a change of ownership in 2020), have been seeking to increase user acquisition and retention by aggregating new functionalities into their dating apps. Some of these attempts were initially promising, such as livestreaming, which represented 91.3% and 88.5% of Blued's total revenues in 2018 and 2019, respectively (BlueCity, 2020). The financial achievement of Blued has led to the listing of its parent company BlueCity on Nasdaq, thereby becoming the first of its kind to be publicly traded on a US stock exchange. This achievement was accomplished 2 years prior to its global rival Grindr, which attained public status in November 2022 (Aliaj, 2022). What ensued was that BlueCity acquired Lesdo (a dating app for same-sex-attracted women) and Aloha (Ding, 2020), growing into a monopoly in China's

LGBTQ market. Despite its dominance, BlueCity suffered a significant decline in its stock price, plummeting from USD23.43 to USD1.34 during its 2-year tenure as a publicly traded entity. Consequently, the company was re-privatized in July 2022 (Pandaily, 2022).

There are multiple factors that are responsible for the fall of BlueCity in the stock market. The strike of COVID-19 fell hard on Blued's livestreaming business, under which the city-wide lockdowns enforced restrictions on its group streaming and the platform's partnered MCNs (multi-channel networks)

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responsible for recruiting new streamers. The company's other business—the surrogacy service BlueBaby—closed before it could turn a profit following the Zheng Shuang scandal, a popular Chinese actress who was accused of abandoning her two surrogate babies in the United States (Gan, 2021). As China officially opposes the practice, the scandal put BlueBaby under close media scrutiny. Another instance of unsuccessful efforts can be seen in the social game *Werewolf*, which is terminated by Aloha due to budgetary controls. These cases attest to an increasingly evident, but often overlooked, aspect of China's LGBTQ platforms: despite their active business expansions, their strategies often turn out to be unsustainable.

Blued and ZANK's founders describe their approach to business expansion as “functionality imbrication,” which involves adding new features to their platform's basic dating structure to cater to multi-sided markets (Wang, 2020a). It should be noted that the functionalities that China's LGBTQ platforms incorporated into their interfaces are those that have already proved to be viable in the mainstream market. Before *Werewolf* was introduced to Aloha, the independent *Werewolf* game app (<https://langrensha.163.com/>), published by NetEase, had already achieved market success. Aloha introduced the game (Figures 1 and 2) to its platform in September 2017 to tap into the growing queer gaming market. In April 2018, however, the game was closed due to a significant increase in costs associated with game marketing, operation, and content moderation. These expenses were exacerbated by China's Internet regulations, which classified homosexuality as a category of pornographic, obscene, and vulgar content (Wang & Bao, 2023).

Using Aloha's *Werewolf* as a case study, this article presents a critical analysis of China's queer media industry, which operates in a niche, precarious, and heavily regulated market, but has managed to thrive despite setbacks. My analysis is informed by scholarly work on platform economies that explore social games and queer social media. The research data comprise a digital ethnography conducted between September 2017 and April 2018, along with an interview with Xiao Qiang, the CEO of Aloha. I argue that in expanding their market into the mainstream, there are two inherent limits faced by China's LGBTQ platforms.

The first is that the mobile ecosystem in which Chinese LGBTQ platforms develop is dominated and monopolized by a few major players including ByteDance, Alibaba, and Tencent. In the gaming sector, this list also includes NetEase. These few platforms capture a significant share of the already niche LGBTQ market due to the winner-take-all effect (see also Nieborg, 2016). Acknowledging this market configuration is of particular importance in understanding that China's LGBTQ platforms rarely operate as independent enterprises. At the operational level, these platforms rely on established platforms for financing and marketing. Meanwhile, from a technological standpoint, the features that have been integrated



**Figure 1.** The interface of Aloha. The five buttons are “Match,” “Message,” “Timeline,” “Livestreaming,” and “More.” Users need to click “More” to enter the *Werewolf* game. (Screenshot of the promotional materials in the App Store.)

into their interfaces—such as livestreaming and gaming—are not exclusive to these platforms, but are rather ubiquitous across major platforms. The scope of innovation for LGBTQ platforms is largely determined by a handful of major platforms, which serve as a source of feasible service prototypes.

Second, since 2015, LGBTQ content has been subject to continuous market regulation in wake of its emergence as a growth point in the then-nascent streaming market. This phenomenon is especially noticeable with the proliferation of LGBTQ-themed content, primarily in the form of web dramas, on the competing video streaming sites, iQiyi, Tencent Video, and Youku (Wang & Bao, 2023). Although some brands (e.g., Kiehl's and Durex) have chosen LGBTQ platforms for marketing campaigns, these brands would opt for safer platforms in times of retightening regulations. Consequently, LGBTQ-focused platforms are often left to develop in a hostile and precarious market, whereas mainstream platforms have the option to pursue other themes.



**Figure 2.** The game interface of Aloha’s *Werewolf*. The werewolf identity is only visible to other werewolf members. Other players can only see their own identities. Participants communicate through the button “Press and Speak” at the bottom of the screen. A countdown is embedded to ensure speaking time is evenly divided among players.

In the following, I first review the literature on social games, China’s LGBTQ platforms, and transgressive gameplay. Following that, I contextualize queer gameplay and the Werewolf game in Aloha. Next, I elaborate on my methods for analyzing Aloha’s *Werewolf*. The analytical sections are divided into three parts: (1) gamified desires in *Werewolf* play, (2) the queer gaming market and Aloha’s functionality imbrication, and (3) the inherent limits of Aloha’s market expansion. I conclude with a discussion of an “inward” approach that enhances queer users’ unmet needs (e.g., sexual, medical) in their business expansion.

## Social Games, LGBTQ Platforms, and Transgressive Gameplay

Social games refer to a genre of casual games integrated into social networking platforms or played on independent gaming apps (Bergstrom, 2019; Leaver, 2016; Nieborg, 2015, 2016). Distinct from hardcore, PC-based games such as *World of Warcraft*, social games are characterized by simple user interfaces and game rules, often blending gaming with social networking (Bergstrom, 2019). The emergence of smartphones and tablets as popular platforms for publishing has brought about a significant transformation in the gaming industry, affecting both the commodity form of games and their operational logic. As a result, the “free-to-play” model has become the dominant business model, replacing traditional game sales (Leaver, 2016; Nieborg, 2015). In a connective mobile ecosystem, the market power is concentrated and centralized within a few major players (e.g., the so-called “Big Five” in the Western market and the “BAT” in the Chinese market). These major platforms set the terms on how social games come to be monetized. In the “free-to-play” model, social games operate as a service that commoditizes in-game virtual items, user attention (i.e., advertising), and user data (Nieborg, 2015, 2016; Whitson, 2019). In a way, social games are not stand-alone media products but are platform-dependent at their core.

China’s gaming market sees a parallel platform-dependent trajectory. In September 2022, for example, a social game *Sheep a Sheep* (similar to the elimination game) became a national sensation with a daily player base of 60 million on WeChat (Nan, 2022). What distinguishes *Sheep a Sheep* from social games in other geographical markets is that gamers play the game on the interface of WeChat via a mini-program (Cheng, 2022). Following its initial hit, *Sheep a Sheep* was released as a game app on both the App Store and the Google Play Store. While it may seem that the success of the game owes much to its access to WeChat’s 1.31 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2022), the game also increases user engagement for WeChat. It is the second point that I want to highlight in this article: social games offer a solution for social media platforms in times of decreasing user engagement. This strategy resembles another viral in-app social game, *Airplane War*, that WeChat embedded in its interface in 2013, when the messaging app had a user base of only 400 million (Blum, 2013). Following its success on WeChat, not only was the game app downloaded 180 million times, but it also brought WeChat new users (Blum, 2013).

China’s LGBTQ platforms adopt a similar strategy by adding services to their interfaces that have already been proven to be viable in the mainstream market—a process called “functionality imbrication” by founders of Blued and ZANK. The process of functionality imbrication entails more than a simple technical combination of diverse services into a singular interface. Rather, it involves an organic aggregation of



both new and pre-existing affordances facilitated by user activity, interactions, and explorations (Wang, 2020a).

Since the release of China's first gay men-focused dating app *Blued* in 2012, these LGBTQ platforms have incorporated functionalities (appearing as a button in the interface) including feeds, newsletter, livestreaming, e-commerce retailing (e.g., skincare products, men's fashion), online pharmacy (e.g., drugs for HIV infection and sexually transmitted diseases), and surrogacy consulting (Deck & Yang, 2021; Miao & Chan, 2020). All these services have been successful prototypes in the app market. The incorporation of social games into the interfaces of LGBTQ platforms can be viewed as a continuity of the functional integration. By operating the *Werewolf* game within the *Aloha*'s dating feature, the process of functionality imbrication gives rise to a form of transgressive play that obviates the need for a separate gaming app.

The literature on game studies in both Chinese and Western contexts has extensively documented transgressive gameplay among queer users. A distinctive practice observed in this regard is the utilization of game avatars to participate in virtual sexual and romantic activities (Brown, 2015; Liu, 2019; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012). Despite the existing scholarship that scrutinizes the cultural significance of transgressive gameplay and its associated ramifications, including homophobia, misogyny, and gender-based harassment (Pulos, 2013; Shaw, 2017; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012), there is a dearth of research that addresses why the inclusion of queer characters in game design as a strategy for combating homophobia has proven to be unproductive and less appealing to queer players (Pulos, 2013; Shaw, 2017; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012).

Adrienne Shaw (2014, pp. 54–56) criticizes the assumption that queer players actively identify with their game characters. In her analysis, the significance of representations for queer players is “relatively unimportant,” as their gameplay is predominantly driven by the need for escapism. Nevertheless, caution is advised against dismissing the significance of queer representations entirely. A critical examination of when and how representations become relevant in queer people's gameplay is arguably crucial. For that purpose, Shaw (2014) proposes an audience research approach that combines queer people's gameplay with their other media consumption, rather than relying solely on textual analysis of games.

This study expands on this critical perspective by putting China's LGBTQ platforms into a larger market context in which their businesses come to exist. By moving LGBTQ platforms beyond a representational and expressional perspective, this article uses the case of *Aloha*'s *Werewolf* to zoom in on the prospect for the queer gaming market in China. It also zooms out on the inherent limits of the business expansion of China's LGBTQ platforms in a market that is regulatory and where the winner-take-all prevails.

## Aloha: Multiple Functionalities and Werewolf

*Aloha*, which was launched in 2014 by female entrepreneur Xiao Qiang in Beijing, resembles a synthesis of *Tinder* and *Instagram*—users swipe left and right to find people to like/follow based on their profile picture and other in-app photos. Since its release, the app has incorporated functionalities of dating, photo sharing, livestreaming, and gaming. The continuous updates in app features allow users to pursue multiple yet various—and even contradictory—usage and affordances that are underlined by its basic dating structure, many of which are not intended by the app developers (Evans et al., 2017).

Before the introduction of *Werewolf*, swiping and livestreaming were *Aloha*'s main features, each of which has drawbacks of its own. For example, conversations are rarely initiated by swiping—users usually swipe and receive photos posted by the people they follow in their personal feeds. Interactions in livestreaming are by and large streamer-centered. Paying viewers are more likely to have a conversation with the streamer. According to the founder of *Aloha*, although hook-ups facilitated by dating apps are crucial to retain users, from her perspective “as a woman,” queer sociality can take on other forms than hooking up. The integration of the *Werewolf* game is an attempt to experiment with sociality in a way that does not orient toward sex. However, as I will discuss later, although it is difficult for players to hook up in the game, the game's voice-centric interactions often revolve around sexual intimacy.

### The Game Rules of Werewolf

“*Werewolf*” is originally a face-to-face card game popular at parties, clubs, and other social occasions. The *Werewolf* game is now played increasingly on mobile apps. The game rules and roles may differ geographically. To avoid confusion, this article only draws on data from the Chinese mode of play. In China, the character roles in the game normally include werewolves, villagers, a seer, a hunter, and a witch. These roles are divided into three groups by nature: the villains (werewolves), the commoners (villagers), and the guardians (seer, hunter, and witch). The werewolves win if they kill either all the commoners or all the guardians. The commoners and the guardians, on the other hand, win if they vote out all the werewolves.

The game contains a series of night phases and daytime phases, moderated by a machine voice. The two phases proceed alternately in performing tasks of a given role at night and identifying werewolves in the daytime until one side meets the criteria for winning the game. The game starts with a machine voice announcing, “The night falls, close your eyes”; the game then enters into the night phase. During the night, the werewolves and the guardians will be called awake in order. The werewolves are the first to be asked to perform

the task of killing a player. After the kill, the witch, who has both a poison and an antidote, will be called awake. The dead participant will be visible to the witch, the character can use the antidote to save the victim, or use the poison to kill another player. Following that, the seer is woken to identify whom they suspect to be a werewolf. The machine voice confirms or denies the identification. The hunter is the last to be called. The hunter is capable of killing a player contingent on when they are killed: either in the first night phase or during the daytime when it is voted out.

After the werewolves and the guardians have performed their tasks, the game enters the daytime. The machine voice will announce the dead and initiate an orderly discussion to allow players to speak and analyze whom to vote for. To establish trust, the seer usually leads the discussion by revealing their role's identity and disclosing the result of their identification to prevent a werewolf from seizing the seer's identity to spread disinformation and control the narrative. The werewolves tend to opt for hiding their real identities in the daytime and pretending to be village members or guardians, while inciting real villagers and guardians to lynch each other. In this process, a werewolf suspect is likely to be identified. The suspect then needs to defend themselves to avoid being voted out. The participant who receives the majority vote will be removed from the game and counted as dead. After the first vote, the game enters the second night phase and repeats the wake-up call procedure until the winning criteria are met.

## Methods

This research is part of a digital ethnographic study of China's gay dating apps—Blued, Aloha, ZANK—that started in 2015. Since then, these platforms have been a moving target, characterized by constant changes in interfaces as a result of functionality imbrication. The early start of the research has allowed me to make timely digital ethnographic interventions to document both successful and failed business strategies of these LGBTQ platforms. When *Werewolf* appeared in Aloha's interface on 3 September 2017, I immediately observed the change in Aloha's interface, and started to play the game with an analytical purpose.

My ethnographic play of the *Werewolf* game follows digital ethnographic strategies that move beyond participant observation from a distance to actively engage with gameplay to produce good qualitative data (Bluteau, 2021). To ensure that my participation can produce good qualitative data, I adopt an approach of "game playing as a method" (Mäyrä, 2008). This method distinguishes analytical play from leisurely play. The analytical play requires researchers to be responsive and observant. In doing so, researchers take notes and relate games to wider sociocultural contexts in the very process of play, so as to ascribe social significance and cultural meanings to a particular game. In the case of Aloha's *Werewolf*, I extend these contexts into the sexual and the

mobile market as well as the geographical (China as a site of research).

I played Aloha's *Werewolf* 761 times throughout the game's operation (3 September 2017–2 April 2018). During the gameplay, I became acquainted with 11 players in three game groups, and they become my respondents when questions are arising from gameplay with them. My identity as a researcher and the research purposes were disclosed to these 11 players. During the gameplay, these 11 players often revealed my identity to other stranger players to elicit their disbelief. This revelation of my researcher identity is playful to these players because many do not think *Werewolf* is worthy of scientific research, as the game is "causal," "simple," and not considered "serious." After obtaining verbal consent, I interviewed these 11 players via WeChat with open-ended questions, such as "why are you killing xx?" "Why are you making xx a suspect?" "Why play the *Werewolf* game on Aloha?" "What makes you remain in or depart from a game room?" "What types of participants do you like to play with or want to kill?" and "Is winning in the game important?" Pseudonyms are used when their quotes appear in the article.

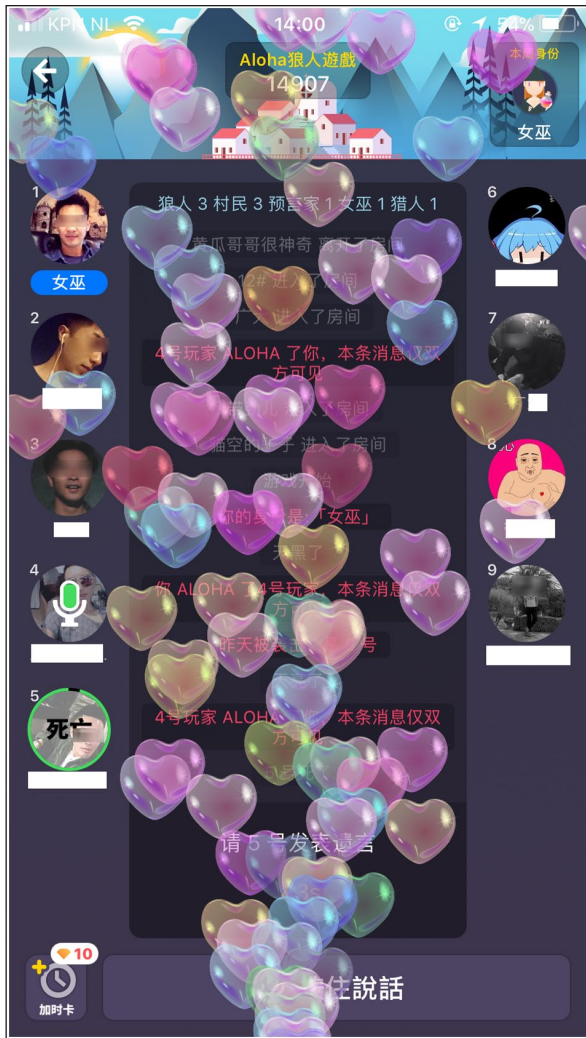
To gain information about how the game operates from an industry insider's perspective, a 2-hr-long in-depth interview with the founder and CEO of Aloha was conducted in Beijing on 21 April 2018. The questions concentrated on the relationship between games and queer social networking, and the role social games played in shaping Aloha as a dating app.

## Playful Gayness, Gamified Desires, and Networked Intimacy in *Werewolf*

When the *Werewolf* game was first introduced to Aloha, participants engaged in the game in more or less the same way as it is played in the mainstream: competing to find out inconsistencies in participants' testimonies and aiming to win the game. However, the game soon morphed into an intimate pastime as a result of *Werewolf*'s unique technical design and queer men's subversive play of the game.

When entering a game room, people normally examine other players' profiles and in-app photo albums. Some players exit a game room if they find other participants not attractive to them. Intriguingly, some players quit a game room if they cannot find a "top" (the penetrative position in gay sex) in the group. Although the game is not designed for hooking up, players nonetheless prefer to play with people who adopt a sex position different from theirs.

During the gameplay, players are able to fire a cupid's arrow toward a specific player. When such action is taken, a heart sticker, which is visible to all participants, will appear on the profiles of both the sender and the receiver. Players can follow participants to whom they are attracted. When the described activity takes place, the person that is followed will receive a flurry of hearts spreading all over the screen (Figure 3). These technical designs affectively mediate the flow of play, activities, and interactions. Consequently, game



**Figure 3.** Hearts stickers spread over the screen when new connections are made in *Werewolf*.

rules become increasingly irrelevant because this emotional input makes participants less obsessed with the credibility of others' testimonies.

This can be further illustrated by the changing in-app advertising slogans of Aloha's *Werewolf*. From "invite your friends to play" and "game opens all day" to "orgasm in the brain" and "flirt while you play," these shifts indicate that the game becomes less about winning and losing than game designers might have intended. While playing, players often lean toward chatting with other participants. For them, the pleasure of play rarely stems from being on the winning side. Rather, the pleasure comes from having an intimate interaction with participants that they find attractive. Although the win rate is displayed on a player's profile, participants usually take it as an indicator of the personality and reliability of a person. Instead of taking a high win rate as a good reflection of a person, it is usually interpreted as being non-reliable, largely because winning the game entails good cheating skills.

According to my observations, participants focus more on the theatrical performances of the player when giving testimony. Playing with people they consider attractive, therefore, becomes more important than playing with people with excellent gaming skills. For many, this attractiveness is not merely about the looks of a player, but more about the personality (e.g., fun and chilled) and voices (e.g., deep or masculine) that "emerge" from gameplay. In a game in which I was a participant, I found several players did not vote the werewolf out even though his testimonies had given away his identity. After the game, these participants explained that they were aware of him being a werewolf. However, they found the way the werewolf defended himself with a self-confident swagger "amusing" and "entertaining," which made them want to keep the person in the game for longer to watch more of his theatrical acts.

This transgressive gameplay leads to intimate attachments among participants. For example, Ren, a 23-year-old online retailing seller based in Shenzhen, developed a crush on Hangzhou-based player Hai (26 years old, in-between jobs). For Ren, the feelings he had for Hai had nothing to do with the profile picture and in-app photo albums, but were developed in the game in which they both participated. He says,

Neither swiping profile photos nor watching streamers, who often come across as pretentious, interest me. *Werewolf* allows me to see a person's personality and real life. I have a thing for fun and easy-going guys. Hai behaved exactly like this when he played the game. It was really amusing when he stoked up drama to convince us that he was innocent when he was actually a werewolf.

In the same game room, several participants may become attached to the same player, inciting them to vie with each other for the player's attention. In the case of Ren, when a competitor appeared, he would "kill" the person during the first night if his role was a werewolf. Following that action, the interaction time for the competitor was taken away, because the "dead" were only allowed to observe the rest of the game. On 5 October 2017, a competitor of Ren was killed again under the game role of the hunter—a character that was able to kill another player if being killed on the first night. In leaving his final words, the competitor confessed yet again to Hai, "I will kill Hai regardless (of his role)." The consequence of this action was that participants who had feelings for Hai were deprived of the motivation to continue the game. It was an entertaining moment for participants who were not emotionally involved to watch the scene unfold.

These emotional entanglements often arise from interactions that are spontaneous but unrelated to the game. For example, when asked what made Xuan, a 22-year-old office assistant based in Wuxi, like a fellow player, he said it was "love at first play." During the gameplay, they pretended to have dated in the past. Other participants were intrigued,



surmising that they cheated the game by trading game roles in private. These stories and activities, which are not about the game per se but do emerge during the gameplay, make Aloha's *Werewolf* less competitive but more emotionally charged. These game-facilitated emotions and feelings, in turn, affectively attune the gameplay. For example, in the games we played together, Xuan was reluctant to suspect the player he had feelings for of being a werewolf because he was convinced that doing so would upset that person. These examples show that the emotional attachments turn game rules into intimate social networks in queer people's subversive play of mainstream social games, which encourage participants to stay on the platform for a longer time. As Xuan said, "No one would stay up so late to play a game if no personal feelings were attached."

### Functionality Imbrication and the Prospect for the Queer Gaming Market

It is a common experience that queer men use Aloha in the same way that they use Instagram—posting well-groomed selfies, travel pictures, gym training, and the like. For them, private conversations are a rare occurrence. This may partly explain the uptake of *Werewolf* on Aloha. As Xuan put it,

Introducing the *Werewolf* game to Aloha is terrific. The game has brought people closer. Peacocks (referring to queer men who are perceived as narcissistic on social media) are no longer peacocks. They became real in these games . . . Unlike private messaging, which often leads to nowhere after saying "what's up," we can actually feel people, putting their personalities and looks into perspective during the gameplay. We can also try to see if we can get along. (Xuan, 22-year-old office assistant, Wuxi)

This user experience has been corroborated by Xiao Qiang. During the interview, she confided that her company has never wanted to make hooking up a prominent feature for Aloha. What users might think of as a drawback has, for Xiao Qiang, made Aloha "unique," although its users may beg to differ.

In the interview, Xiao Qiang disclosed that only 3% of the app's daily active users play *Werewolf*. The phenomenon of low user conversion rates into monetizable players is not exclusive to social games and underscores the high reliance of social games on major platforms. This is due to the inclination of the "free-to-play" business model to foster economies of scale rather than catering to a niche audience segment (Nieborg, 2015). By contrast, the percentages for livestreaming and paying members are 20% and 10%, respectively. The reason that livestreaming users are more active than users who swipe is that the interactions in the former are more or less geared toward the sexual, emotional, and the intimate (Wang, 2020b; Ye et al., 2022). In this light, the strategic decision to limit hook-up opportunities for users whose sexual orientations define a distinct niche may explain the

challenges faced by Aloha in expanding its market. That is, the platform's appeal to queer people is predicated more on the range of services it provides than on its purported alignment with their sexual identities.

Despite *Werewolf* having been a popular social game for users who play, the increasing operation costs, including game marketing, content moderation, and broadband, have made the game unsustainable following a barrage of Internet regulations since 2015—content featuring homosexuality was first categorized as banned content by China's two industry associations, spanning from television and cinema to online streaming dramas. Queer representations such as gender non-conforming men were reprimanded as "abnormal sissy men esthetics" by China's culture and Internet regulators in their policymaking and Internet crackdowns (Wang & Bao, 2023). Among these government-enforced crackdowns, one of the leading gay men-focused gay apps, ZANK, which bolstered 20 million users, was performantly closed in 2018 after 4 years of operation for violating sex-related "illegal content" (Wang, 2020b).

Aloha was a tech start-up with about 50 employees at the time I interviewed Xiao Qiang. Of this number, 30 were in the content moderation team. The termination of *Werewolf* seems to have been foreseen due to insufficient financial support and the need for prompt profit generation. Notwithstanding, it does not diminish queer audiences, who, due to their heightened presence within the market, have emerged as a propitious gaming demographic. In 2017, China's gaming company Kunlun Tech acquired the US-based gay dating app Grindr, seeking to expand its market to global queer players, although the company was ultimately forced to sell Grindr back to the United States under the Trump Administration (Platt et al., 2019).

In light of regulatory and geopolitical influences, a cautious evaluation of the queer gaming market is warranted. During 2017 and 2018, several queer men-focused mobile games were developed in partnership with Blued (Cao, 2018; Li, 2017; Yu, 2017). However, none of these games has gained market success. The possible explanation for this, as posited by Adrienne Shaw (2014), is that the game developers focus solely on the representation of queer people, emphasizing community support for "coming out" to family members and educating individuals on sexual identities. However, this approach may not be appealing to queer players who seek gaming as a form of escapism or entertainment.

In mainstream mobile games, in contrast, there is a perceived growth of queer people playing *Honor of Kings* (*wangzhe rongyao*) and *Player Unknown's Battlegrounds* (*juedi qiusheng*), both of which are published by China's tech conglomerate Tencent. The queerness of mainstream games has gained significant attention on social media platforms such as Douyin and Zhihu (often referred to as "China's Quora"). Videos uploaded to Douyin that showcase gay male players tantalize heterosexual male players

*in Honor of Kings* have sparked feverish online discourse. Commentators use the slang “secrets to making a fortune” (*caifu mima*) to describe straight male players who appear queer-friendly to increase their desirability in *Honor of Kings*. These cases indicate that queer people’s selection of gaming platforms is less predicated on the platform’s alignment with LGBTQ identities.

My interviewees report that they do not play Aloha’s *Werewolf* game simply because it is a queer men-focused platform. Rather, it is the potential for unanticipated sexual and intimate interactions that may arise during gameplay that draw them to play. Such a gaming encounter is not exclusive to the *Werewolf* game, as it can also emerge during playing games on mainstream apps. The interviewees Xuan and Ya (a 21-year-old college student), who are fans of *Honor of Kings*, find that gaming with male strangers without knowing their sexual orientation can be more entertaining. They use female-gendered avatars to play with male avatars in the game (see also Evans, 2018; Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018). This demonstrates gaming experience comes to be more important for queer people than the game’s alignment with a specific sexual identity.

This explains why Aloha becomes partnered with NetEase, one of China’s major online game manufacturers, after the closure of its *Werewolf*. This collaboration allows users to log into games published by NetEase with their Aloha accounts. While such a partnership attests to a viable market for queer gameplay in China, it also demonstrates the inherent limits of business growth for China’s LGBTQ platforms in a mobile market where the winner-take-all prevails and regulations are ubiquitous.

### **Sex-Phobic Design and a Winner-Take-All Market: The Inherent Limits of Market Expansion of Aloha**

In contrast to other gay dating apps that present user profiles in accordance with physical proximity (e.g., Blued and Grindr), Aloha arranges user profiles into groups based on their respective cities of residence. In recommending matches, Aloha also incorporates user profiles from different cities. This technical design makes an off-line meetup very unlikely. According to Xiao Qiang, this design is to avoid sexting that she views as constituting harassment. While acknowledging the sexual needs of queer users, the overarching brand image of Aloha centers on a vision of queer lifestyle that embodies attributes such as “style,” “taste,” and “quality.” In her own words, “Probably because I’m a woman, I find hook-ups disgusting (*fangan*). Although I understand sex is part of sociality for homosexuals, I don’t think it is the only way to do it.” Xiao Qiang further explains that “sex” has become a community “syndrome” for China’s queer men-focused platforms as a result of ubiquitous (borderline) sexual content. Xiao Qiang seeks to develop an app in which queer sex plays a comparatively minor role.

However, the complete removal of sexual features appears to be improbable. Aloha encourages users to pay a membership fee (regular for 360 Chinese yuan per year and diamond for 720 Chinese yuan per year) to “unlock” nearby users, among other privileges, such as removal of ads, more precise recommendations, and the ability to hide locations. This suggests that despite the app’s efforts to create “new” user demands that do not center around hook-ups, “sex nearby” has proven to be a highly viable source of revenue for Aloha. According to Xiao Qiang, membership and advertisement in combination comprise approximately 30%–40% of Aloha’s total revenues, while livestreaming contributes the remaining 60%. Chatting with people nearby is freely available on Blued. The divergence in the strategy adopted by Aloha and Blued with regard to “sex nearby” has resulted in a marked discrepancy in their user bases, with Aloha having approximately 2.7 million users and Blued boasting a considerably larger user base of 40 million (China Global Television Network, 2020).

For Xiao Qiang, although users who are matched in the app do not always initiate a chat, it is not indicative of a failure or loss of the connection. Rather, their interactions are redirected to a content feed where they can peruse updates from the accounts they are following. In Aloha, the structure of connections is configured to be content-oriented, with the aim of motivating users to engage with posts that pique their interest. This approach diverges from a user-centric model that prioritizes the initiation of private conversations to facilitate meet-ups.

In the interview, Xiao Qiang explains that the aim of Aloha has never been creating yet another hook-up app, but an “Instagram” dedicated to queer audiences. This is an important difference between Aloha and Blued—the former aims to create a representational space for queer people while the latter focuses on social networking. Creating a queer version of Instagram is implemented following the closure of *Werewolf*. Based on their market research, Instagram has a significant and engaged user base but remains inaccessible in China because of The Great Firewall, a series of regulatory and technological measures executed by the Chinese government to restrict access to certain foreign websites. This deficiency in the market presents Aloha with an opportunity to integrate an efficacious prototype into its interface. According to Xiao Qiang, the underlying dating feature of Aloha has the potential to augment the Instagram model by fostering greater user engagement. However, this vision is falling out of favor in terms of both monetization and user experience.

To make a queer “Instagram,” in 2018, Aloha initiated an influencer scheme in collaboration with Taobao, a preeminent retailing platform owned by Alibaba. The scheme incorporates approximately 300 queer men with a minimum of 10,000 followers each. Similar to *Werewolf*, the influencer scheme appears promising at first, mostly because Aloha finds its fit in the market expansion of Taobao to queer



customers. Kiehl's, a cosmetics retailer, represents one of the initial cohorts of clients to launch a campaign on Aloha. During the interview, Xiao Qiang revealed that Durex and KY (a lubricant brand) have also joined the ranks of Aloha's advertisers. While some prominent influencers who post selfies showcasing Kiehl's products have contractual arrangements with the brand, Aloha extends the invitation to unaffiliated influencers to produce content for compensation ranging from 2,000 to 10,000 Chinese yuan (approximately USD291–USD1,457) per image that features a Kiehl's product (Wang, 2020b). Despite its initial hype, this scheme has been terminated, much like the *Werewolf* game. Outside of LGBTQ-focused platforms, in contrast, the queer influencer economy continues to thrive on platforms such as Douyin, Weibo, and WeChat (Wang & Ding, 2022; Zhou, 2019).

Xiao Qiang seems to have anticipated yet another failed attempt of its market expansion. In the interview, she expressed concern that the powerful recommender system of Instagram might make this strategy untenable because algorithms match queer creators with queer audiences in a larger market context. The small user base limits the prospect of financial return because economies of scale—in which businesses benefit from large size and scale by negating or surpassing costs—can hardly be applied to LGBTQ platforms. These platforms' uniqueness in the market diminishes, if representations are not a primary motivation for queer people's media consumption. In light of the fact that personalized recommendations can facilitate LGBTQ connections in mainstream platforms, the algorithm augments the winner-take-all effects of major platforms by virtue of their substantial user data volume. As a consequence, LGBTQ platforms are losing traction as a market segment. It makes more sense for brands to campaign on platforms with broader and more heterogeneous audiences, given that queer demographics can be readily discerned by personalized algorithms.

The constantly added new features, which purport to acquire and retain users, turned out to be unsustainable exactly because a niche market is by definition "niche." As pointed out by Hongwei Bao (2021, p. 3), queer community media is "niche" and "narrowcasting," as opposed to "broadcasting" and "mass communication." This can be worsened if the app design overlooks what makes their targeted users a group, a community, and a (niche) market in the first place. For needs that fall outside their niche quest, they can always find replacements in the mainstream.

## Conclusion

Through a case study of Aloha's *Werewolf*, this article has critically reflected on the strategy of functionality imbrication in China's LGBTQ platforms. When zooming in on the actual gameplay of *Werewolf*, it shows that queer players appropriate and repurpose the game for sexual and emotional networking, which makes winning or losing in the game practically irrelevant. This is in stark contrast to how the

game is played in the mainstream. The integration of *Werewolf* and Aloha has made gameplay more intimate and dating more playful, giving rise to a digital culture of gamified desires. This transgressive gameplay shows great potential for the queer gaming market.

However, when zooming out on the mobile market in which Aloha operates, it is found that LGBTQ platforms may not benefit from the queer gaming market in the way they want: reclaiming the queer audience market through their hope that queer people actively identify with their platforms. As I have shown in the article, the few dominant platforms engender a winner-take-all ecosystem that makes niche apps less viable in their own right (Nieborg, 2015, 2016). Expanding their market into the gaming industry based on the assumption that queer representations are the most important factor to motivate queer people to play a game further contributes to their unsustainable business model (Shaw, 2014).

China's LGBTQ platforms' business explorations and innovations, while having yielded positive outcomes, minimize the sexual features after they achieve a monopoly status in the online LGBTQ market. The inherent limits of the queer market become increasingly evident in their endeavors to push their market reach by integrating functionalities that have achieved market success in the mainstream. The niche size of the user base often makes their businesses unsustainable because the rule of economies of scale may not apply to businesses for minority groups. This can explain both the reason and the outcome of China's LGBTQ platforms' market expansion: the prospect for financial gains is premised upon more users, whereas user acquisition and retention are largely dependent on the satisfaction of their fundamental needs. Caught in between, platform owners are leaning toward maintaining a distance from what has made their users a community: their sexualities. Queer sexualities, be they physical, emotional, or social, define their culture, needs, and identities. Downplaying this can undermine the market viability of China's LGBTQ platforms.

When user growth has stagnated because the population of targeted audiences is small, seeking an inward expansion by catering to a wider range of needs of its niche users might be a feasible option. BlueCity provides a case in point. Given the lack of PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) availability in the national health care system, BlueCity launched the He Health platform to make PrEP available to gay and bisexual men. In the second quarter of 2021, He Health generated USD2.4 million in sales (Deck & Yang, 2021). This example requires LGBTQ platform companies to rethink the relationship between market expansion and the unmet needs of their users. The two may not contradict—as LGBTQ platform owners believe—if handled properly, which may lead to mutual growth and performance enhancement if the two can be well balanced in a market that is niche, but also creative and resilient.

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