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Proximity-Based Gay Apps, Context Collapse, and Queer Identity Negotiation: Ambivalent Experiences of Gay Male Academics on Chinese Campuses

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ABSTRACT

This study explores gay male academics' experiences using proximity-based gay dating apps on Chinese university campuses. Drawing on interviews with 41 participants, it examines how "context collapse" – the merging of distinct audiences on social media – shapes queer visibility and student engagement in culturally and politically constrained environments. Participants manage their identity by deliberately avoiding app use on campus, curating profiles, and avoiding student interactions, positioning proximity-based gay apps as precarious terrains. Simultaneously, these platforms enable "context collusions," in which users intentionally integrate distinct audiences or facets of identity for strategic purposes, fostering mentorship, sexual health advocacy, and queer activism. By extending the study of gay dating apps into professional and educational contexts, and framing these platforms as both digital closets and support tools enabled by proximity-based technology, this research advances understanding of context collapse and digital queer agency.

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Introduction

Powered by geolocation technology, dating applications have transformed intimacy and relationships through algorithm-driven connections that prioritize convenience, speed, and a commodified approach to human interaction (De Ridder 2022). They redefine how people navigate closeness, blending opportunities for flexibility with challenges to deeper, lasting bonds (Hobbs, Owen, and Gerber 2017). Their functions now span well beyond romance, evolving into multipurpose platforms or "people-nearby applications" used for friendship, networking, and socializing (Bumble n.d.; Zytko et al. 2022). This expanded utility is especially visible in queer1-specific platforms like Grindr and Blued. Grindr, which brands itself as a "social networking app," offers users a sense of belonging and identity beyond its initial purpose of facilitating hookups (Wu and Trottier 2022). Similarly, Blued, a leading Chinese gay dating app, has introduced innovative features such as live streaming and discussion groups, creating opportunities for users to engage in conversations, share experiences, and provide mutual support on topics ranging from coming out to navigating queer identities (Miao and Chan 2021; Wu and Ward 2020). These advancements challenge the reductive perception of these platforms as mere "hook-up apps" (e.g., Kettrey et al. 2024; Macapagal et al. 2018; Siegel, Chen, and Schrimshaw 2023) and highlight their growing significance in fostering diverse forms of connection, solidarity, and advocacy within queer communities (Miao and Chan 2023; Race 2015). Continuing this

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line of inquiry, this study extends gay dating app research into professional and educational contexts by examining gay male academics' use of proximity-based gay dating apps within Chinese university campuses.

By investigating the use of gay dating apps within professional and educational environments, this paper aims to enhance understanding of how social media users navigate *context collapse* (Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Li et al. 2024). Context collapse refers to the phenomenon where "social media flatten multiple audiences into a single context" (Brandtzaeg and Lüders 2018:2). This concept has been pivotal in discussions around privacy, self-presentation, and evolving user behavior on social platforms (Marwick and Boyd 2011; Vitak 2012). However, most of this research focuses on general-purpose platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WeChat, where audiences are often imagined as broad, distributed, and non-local (Li et al. 2024; Marwick and Boyd 2011; Vitak 2012). These platforms typically support greater user control over audience segmentation and afford relative anonymity or detachment from immediate physical surroundings. In contrast, location-based dating apps narrow the spatial context to "people nearby," often "forcing" users into interactions with those who share little social connections but more physical environments (Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott 2015). This raises important questions about how context collapse unfolds in spatially anchored environments, where digital audiences are not diffuse or abstract but embedded in shared physical and institutional spaces. This paper explores the complexity of user experiences amid context collapse by focusing on Chinese gay academics' engagement with proximity-based gay dating apps on university campuses.

We situate this paper within the context of Xi Jinping's China, where his leadership – since assuming the role of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012 and President in 2013—has been marked by heightened centralization of power and reinforced authoritarian control (Dillon 2024). The changing political climate has manifested in heightened political control within universities, aiming to foster regime loyalty and cultural conformity among students and teachers. Academic freedom in China's higher education has shrunk significantly (Pringle and Woodman 2022), with authorities employing a range of tactics to intimidate, silence, and punish academics and students who challenge official ideologies (Scholars at Risk 2019). In a political climate that suppresses diversity and emphasizes nationalism and homogeneity, non-normative gender expression and sexuality are inevitably viewed as transgression and disruption. As the party-state celebrates and promotes Confucian family values and traditional gender ideologies (Louie 2024), queer visibility has become subject to increasing surveillance and censorship within Chinese higher education institutions (Cui and Burford 2025, 2026; Huang 2025). As a result, Chinese gay academics must carefully engage in self-censorship and identity management across their classroom teaching (Cui 2023b, 2023c), academic research (Cui 2023a, 2024), and interpersonal interactions on campus (Cui 2022, 2023d).

Drawing on interviews with 41 participants, our findings reveal that proximity-based gay dating apps serve as complex digital spaces for Chinese gay academics. While these platforms necessitate careful identity management on campus and deliberate avoidance of student interactions, they simultaneously enable meaningful support and care for gay students. By situating the use of gay dating apps within a context of pronounced cultural and institutional regulation, our study advances scholarship on context collapse and social media. We demonstrate how these platforms function as socially and politically embedded technologies that shape queer visibility, professional experiences and relational boundaries. In doing so, we extend understanding of user experience under conditions of context collapse, by highlighting how proximity-based dating apps function not only as tools for connection but also as sites of both negotiation and care within repressive sociopolitical settings.

Context collapse and queer identity negotiation

The role of context has remained a persistent and key concern within audience-related social media studies. Davis and Jurgenson (2014:477) define *context* as "the identity meaning activated through interaction within a particular social network." In the age of social media,

distinct audiences often become conflated on a single platform, “such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients” (Vitak 2012:541). This phenomenon, widely referred to as *context collapse*, has been a central concern in social media research. Context collapse is often considered problematic because users on social media tend to form assumptions about their intended audience, but platform features rarely align with these expectations, resulting in uncertainty about who is actually receiving and interpreting their messages (Szabla and Blommaert 2020). In response to context collapse, users adopt a range of strategies to manage their visibility and maintain social boundaries. Some actively curate their audiences by adjusting privacy settings, creating segmented friend groups, or operating multiple social media accounts to distinguish between personal and professional spheres (Baym and Boyd 2012; Vitak et al. 2015). Others take a “one-size-fits-all” approach, simplifying the linguistic diversity of their posts to cater to a broad and mixed audience (Gil-Lopez et al. 2018).

Depending on users’ intentionality, Davis and Jurgenson (2014) propose two distinct forms of context collapse: *context collusions*, where users deliberately integrate separate audiences or facets of their identity for strategic or expressive purposes, and *context collisions*, where audiences unintentionally converge, resulting in discomfort, misinterpretation, or reputational risk. Davis and Jurgenson (2014) emphasize that while context collusion involves agency and purposeful blending, context collision is marked by the unexpected loss of control over audience boundaries. These concepts differentiate between voluntary and involuntary forms of context collapse, providing a valuable framework for examining how users navigate visibility and identity across digital environments. In this study, we apply these distinctions to illustrate how proximity-based technologies facilitate context collapse, producing ambivalent experiences that reveal both precarity and resilience.

A growing body of research has examined how queer individuals navigate context collapse online, with particular attention to information disclosure and cross-platform identity management. Duguay (2014), for example, shows how queer users on Facebook continually negotiate sexual-identity visibility through audience segmentation and adaptive self-presentation, illustrating that coming out is an ongoing, mediated process. Extending this, DeVito, Walker, and Birnholtz (2018) conceptualize LGBTQ+ users’ social media engagements as part of a broader social media ecosystem, where platform affordances, norms, and audiences are carefully managed to enable self-expression while minimizing stigma. While Duguay and DeVito focus on semi-identified or mainstream platforms, Triggs, Møller, and Neumayer (2021) shift the lens to anonymity-based environments like Reddit, revealing that even in ostensibly safer spaces, queer users engage in multi-layered context differentiation across bodily, inter-platform, and intra-platform boundaries. This challenges assumptions that anonymity alone offers full protection, instead underscoring the persistent precarity of queer self-presentation online. Taken together, these studies map a complex terrain of queer identity management shaped by technological affordances, social pressures, and individual strategies. However, much of this work concentrates on platforms where users retain some control over anonymity, audience segmentation, or platform switching. Proximity-based dating apps like Grindr or Blued present a distinct challenge: by design, they collapse spatial boundaries and bring nearby users into immediate relational proximity, often without regard for users’ intentions.

Research on the use of proximity-based gay dating apps in China highlights the complex negotiation of queer identity amid context collapse, shaped not only by platform affordances but also by enduring cultural stigmas surrounding sexuality. Apps like Blued, while providing new possibilities for connection and support, are often entangled with discourses of risk and deviance. Public narratives such as the “AIDS-Blued” (艾滋蓝) label associate these platforms with sexual promiscuity and health danger, reinforcing moral judgments and social exclusion (Wang 2023). This contributes to a form of internalized stigma among users (Cao and Smith 2021), who may become hyper-vigilant about visibility, presentation, and audience management (Cao and Smith 2021). This hyper-vigilant negotiation of stigma and risk is also intensified by the platform’s design. Blued’s image-centered and location-based infrastructure produces a heightened form of embodied-spatial visibility, compelling

users to weigh the desire for authentic intimacy against the fear of being recognized offline (Cummings 2020).

While existing studies point out the psychological strain and visibility risks associated with geolocative technologies, they often leave underexamined how these tensions unfold within specific institutional settings in authoritarian contexts, where social media use is deeply entangled with professional norms, surveillance, and potential repercussions. In environments like Chinese universities, where queer teachers and students navigate overlapping physical and digital spaces, the affordances of proximity-based technologies intensify context collapse, making it more acute and difficult to manage. Queer professionals thus encounter a digital landscape in which the stakes of visibility and boundary violations are heightened, and the scope for user discretion may be significantly constrained. The lack of empirical attention to how queer professionals negotiate these entangled boundaries – particularly in contexts where visibility may result in reputational harm or job insecurity – reveals a critical gap in the literature that this study seeks to address. To that end, we ask: How are the subjectivity and agency of Chinese gay academics negotiated when context collapse occurs on proximity-based gay dating apps – platforms shaped by normative expectations, hierarchical power relations, and reputational vulnerability?

Methodology

This study draws on data from a broader qualitative study examining the lived experiences of gay male academics in Chinese higher education institutions. After obtaining ethical permission from the University of Auckland, the first author conducted interviews during 2018–2019 with 40 gay men who held academic positions at Chinese higher education institutions. Participant recruitment primarily occurred through a poster shared on two Chinese platforms: WeChat and Blued. Recruitment was also conducted through snowball sampling, with existing participants forwarding the poster to others who might be interested. To supplement the existing data and provide insight into more recent dynamics within China's political climate and gay apps, an additional participant was interviewed in 2024. Although only one additional participant was recruited, the "information richness" (Braun and Clarke 2022) generated through this interview made it sufficient for the purposes of data collection.

Key demographic characteristics of the participants, including their level of openness about their sexuality, age, professional titles, highest degrees held, and regional distribution, are presented in

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Category	Details	Number of Participants
Sexuality Disclosure	Not disclosed to anyone at work	28
	Disclosed to a few people at work	10
	Publicly disclosed at work	3
Age	20–29	3
	30–39	28
	40–49	10
Professional Title	Lecturers	24
	Associate Professors	7
	Tutors	6
	Full Professors	4
Highest Degree Held	PhD	22
	Master's degree	16
	Bachelor's degree	3
Regional Distribution	North China	2
	Northeast China	2
	Northwest China	1
	East China	16
	Central China	2
	South China	8
	Southwest China	10

Table 1. The participants exhibited varying degrees of workplace disclosure regarding their sexuality, ranging from being completely closeted to disclosing their sexuality to a select few colleagues, to being openly out. Their disciplinary backgrounds spanned the sciences, humanities, and social sciences. Geographically, the participants were distributed across all regions of mainland China, with the majority employed at universities in major cities within East China, Southwest China, and South China. These demographic characteristics may have influenced the research findings, which predominantly capture the perspectives of younger, early-career gay academics in economically developed regions.

The research methods involved individual semi-structured interviews, each spanning 60–120 minutes. All conversations were conducted in Mandarin through WeChat. The interviews encompassed various aspects of professional life, including perceptions of queer inclusivity in academic settings, strategies for managing sexual identity, and experiences of navigating heterosexual norms on campus. With participants' prior consent, all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed word-for-word. Participants reviewed and validated their interview transcripts before analysis commenced. The researchers employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) to process the data. The data analysis was informed by the theoretical concepts of *context collapse, context collusion*, and *context collision* (Davis and Jurgenson 2014), enabling us to unpack the interplay between digital environments and user experiences. This process was also informed by a queer theoretical lens (Burford and Allen 2018; McCann and Monaghan 2019), which not only aimed to challenge heteronormativity[2] by unpacking its manifestations and impacts on queer individuals, but also sought to disrupt the limitations of conventional thinking. Guided by this perspective, the analysis moved beyond dominant assumptions of gay dating apps as primarily sexual tools, instead illuminating the diverse connections they facilitate within professional and educational contexts.

Regarding positionality, both authors identify as gay and previously worked as academics at universities in China, thus conducting this research as insiders. Both authors received academic training and hold PhDs from Western universities. In line with the tenet of reflexive thematic analysis as a subjective and creative process (Braun and Clarke 2022), we view our identities and experiences as a resource rather than a potential threat to knowledge production. Given the sensitive nature of queer issues in China, comprehensive ethical safeguards were implemented. Pseudonyms are used throughout this study, and some data and participant descriptors have been slightly modified or intentionally obscured to protect participant identities.

Proximity-based gay apps as digital closets

Managing and mitigating context collapse

This section examines how gay academics mitigate the risks of context collapse through a range of strategies, including avoiding the use of proximity-based gay apps on campus, obscuring or withholding identifiable information, and exercising caution in interactions with students. Because proximity-based gay dating apps "force" users into the context of "people nearby," gay academics must navigate a digital environment in which the audience is not previously known but instead spatially and institutionally immediate. Ironically, although proximity-based gay apps are designed to connect individuals in close physical distance, gay academics may choose to avoid using them in environments where personal and professional identities are tightly intertwined – such as on a university campus, where queer visibility may pose potential risks to their careers (Cui 2022; Cui and Burford 2025). Rather than embracing the "nearby" functionality of proximity-based dating apps, many participants completely avoided using these apps on campus to protect their privacy and prevent context collapse. They often limited their app usage to off-campus settings, fearing that their identity might be exposed to other gay individuals on campus.

> I don't dare use the app on campus because I'm afraid that students and colleagues on the app will discover my identity. (Xiaogang, 35, Tutor, Guangdong province)

> I only use the app off-campus. As soon as I step onto campus, I absolutely won't use the app. I don't want to have any contact with gay students or teachers here. I don't want anyone on campus to know about my sexuality. I'm worried that if I expose my identity, it could cause trouble. (Tengwen, 39, Lecturer, Shanghai)

Avoiding app use on campus was particularly challenging for those living in faculty housing on campus, a common arrangement among junior academics. In such cases, the blurred line between private and institutional space made it nearly impossible to engage with proximity-based dating apps without risking exposure. Whenever they used gay apps on campus – whether at work or off-duty – their profile picture appeared alongside other gay individuals on campus, most of whom were students. These participants found themselves caught between the desire for connection and the need for discretion, illustrating how the physical co-location of digital audiences exacerbates context collapse. As Liyuan described,

> I'm living in the faculty apartment on campus. This campus is in the countryside, and there's really nowhere else to go around here, so the only people I ever see are either teachers or students. It's super tricky when it comes to gay socializing because pretty much everyone on those apps around here is a student. I feel lonely and want to use the apps to make some gay friends, but I'm also terrified of being outed. I know I need to protect myself, but if I stay hidden, there's no way I can meet anyone new. I feel so torn. (Liyuan, 31, Lecturer, Gansu province)

Participants also reported switching to less location-revealing platforms (e.g., Finka[3]) as a deliberate strategy to keep their location undisclosed. By selecting apps with matching mechanisms that required mutual interest or friend requests prior to interaction, they gained greater control over their visibility and reduced the likelihood of contact from nearby strangers. This strategy complemented broader efforts to restrict app use in spatially sensitive contexts, and underscored the deliberate, precautionary choices gay academics made to minimize recognition and protect professional boundaries.

> When I'm on campus, I don't use Blued; instead, I use Finka. Finka isn't just based on location; it matches users based on interests. You need to add each other as friends before you can chat, which acts as a filter and helps avoid unwanted messages. (Yuqian, 45, Associate Professor, Fujian province)

Besides the risk of exposing their identity, participants were also concerned about using gay apps on campus due to their association with hookups and the social stigma surrounding casual sex. Several participants feared that using these apps, often seen as platforms for hookups, would lead to student gossip and damage their professional reputation. Consequently, they either avoided using these apps or only used them when away from campus.

> I haven't used gay apps for years. Gay apps are usually referred to as "hookup apps." If my students found out I use gay apps, it would not only reveal my sexuality but also negatively affect their perception of my character. (Wenyao, 40, Professor, Fujian province)

> I use my real photos on Blued, but I never use the app on campus. I only use it when I'm a certain distance away from campus. Since I use Blued for hookups, if students saw me on it, it could easily lead to gossip and controversy. (Duxing, 43, Lecturer, Shanghai)

In addition to avoiding app use in campus spaces, participants employed profile-management strategies to minimize their recognizability on Blued. Rather than abstaining from app use entirely, many participants engaged in selective self-presentation shaped by the risks associated with proximity-based visibility. Profile management enabled participants to navigate context collapse through concealment, calculated ambiguity, and selective disclosure, maintaining access to digital queer spaces while protecting their identity. To reduce the likelihood of being recognized by students or colleagues, participants withheld identifiable information such as names, age, and face photos from their profiles. Some chose to post body pictures with their faces covered, or limited their photo uploads to gay apps that do not rely on proximity-based features.

> I didn't put my face photo or personal information on Blued to avoid the awkwardness of being recognized by people on campus. On the Aloha app, I used my face photo because it matches people based on mutual interest, not proximity. (Xiaohan, 33, Tutor, Guangdong province)

> I only use dating apps after leaving campus, and I use them to find hookups. To protect my identity, I don't upload face pictures. Instead, I post body shots to attract people to message me, so my photos are body shots with my face hidden. (Yuqian, 45, Associate Professor, Fujian province)

Participants also adjusted their profile visibility in response to both temporal and spatial contexts, a practice that complemented the earlier-described strategy of avoiding app use on campus. Some shared that they uploaded real face photos only during academic breaks or when they were physically away from campus, moments when their exposure to colleagues or students was perceived to be minimal. This time- and location-sensitive approach offered them a greater sense of control and safety, allowing freer engagement with the app while mitigating the risk of recognition within their professional environment.

> I only use my face photo on Blued during winter and summer breaks when I'm back home, which is in a different province from my institution. During those times, I'm not in my teacher role. But when I'm back on campus, my profession as a teacher becomes a constraint, so I don't put my face photo, name, or personal information on Blued. (Dada, 30, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

To protect their identities, gay academics might resort to providing false information in their app profiles or during online interactions, highlighting an app environment characterized by dishonesty and cautiousness.

> I live in the faculty apartment on campus. Based on the distance, you can tell if someone nearby is also living in the apartment. I've met a colleague this way. To avoid revealing his identity, all his information on the app is fake. He even changed his age to pretend to be a student. (Mingtian, 24, Tutor, Shandong province)

> Once, a student saw my age and asked if I was a teacher. I said no. When he wanted to exchange photos, I sent him a fake one. (Feiming, 31, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

Another key strategy participants employed to manage context collapse was the deliberate avoidance of interaction with students on apps. This disengagement reflected a calculated effort to protect both personal identity and professional standing. Several participants described actively scanning profile details to identify users who might be students, especially those under a certain age, and avoiding conversations altogether. Even when students initiated contact, responses were brief, with many participants expressing reluctance or refusal to arrange any in-person meetings. The small, interconnected nature of campus environments intensified fears of recognition and reputational damage.

> I avoid chatting with students from my university to prevent awkwardness and trouble. I first check the age. If they're around 20 years old or younger, I don't talk to them. (Feiming, 31, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

> I don't initiate conversations with students. If a student says hello, I'll respond briefly, but I don't dare to meet up. The campus is small. I'm worried about being recognized. (Xiaohan, 33, Tutor, Guangdong province)

> When chatting, if a student asks too many personal questions, I won't respond or meet them. (Liyuan, 31, Lecturer, Gansu province)

Participants' concerns about revealing their identity to students through gay apps were especially pronounced for those teaching international students, whom they perceived as more likely to hold negative attitudes toward homosexuality. For example, Xia and Du, two of the participants, were Chinese language teachers instructing international students who might come from regions that are anti-homosexual or have religious backgrounds. To protect themselves from potential homophobia or damage to their professional reputation, Xia hid his identity by not revealing his name and photos on apps, while Du did not confirm his identity by refusing to interact with his students on these platforms.

> I don't use my photos or name on the apps, since some of my students come from Middle Eastern or Arab countries and are Muslim. I'm not sure how accepting they might be of homosexuality, so it's better to be cautious. (Xia, 27, Tutor, Guangdong province)

> Many of my students come from the Middle East, Africa, and Russia, and many are Muslim or Catholic. On Blued and Grindr, I use my real photos, but I never interact with my students on these apps. If a student says hi to me, I either don't respond or block them immediately. I'm worried that if I confirm my identity to them, they might tell their friends, and soon the whole college would know. If my sexuality adversely affects my professional reputation, the college administration may judge me negatively, regardless of my teaching performance. (Du, 28, Tutor, Guangdong province)

Mixed consequences of context collapse

The caution exercised by gay academics regarding context collapse on proximity-based gay apps was not without justification. The geospatial functionality of apps facilitates context collapse on campus, intensifying the risk of exposure and moral judgment within stigmatized environments – regardless of user intention or digital discretion. Context collapse thus was not merely a hypothetical concern but a tangible phenomenon marked by a range of actualized possibilities and consequences that gay academics were compelled to navigate. This section presents the mixed consequences of context collapse, ranging from harassment and gossip by students to disappointment in gay academics' interactions, and, on a more positive note, intimacy between gay academics and students.

In some cases, gay academics faced repercussions after being outed by students, including gossip and harassment. For example, Yuqian recounted a particularly distressing encounter after connecting with a gay student through Blued and later meeting him in person. This interaction resulted in his being outed to a broader group of students, sparking unfriendly gossip and harassment across various settings – online, within the classroom, and in his everyday life. These adverse experiences ultimately led him to resolve never to engage with gay students at his university again.

> The student I met didn't keep my secret and told more people about me. Later, I faced harassment from other students on the app, saying things like 'I know who you are.' I live in a teacher apartment opposite a student dorm, and some students would shine flashlights into my room at night. In class, if I looked at or showed concern for a male student, others would whisper and gossip. Once, I was talking to a male student, and a girl nearby joked, 'The teacher has a crush on you.' I decided never to talk to students on the app again. (Yuqian, 45, Associate Professor, Fujian province)

The caution exercised by gay academics was not limited to interactions with students but extended to interactions with other gay academics at the institution. Similar to their wariness of students, interactions among gay academics on gay apps were often marked by caution, distrust, and a lack of transparency in the exchange of information. For instance, Yuqian felt uncomfortable and unequal in his interaction with another gay teacher in his institution, who asked for Yuqian's information while being reluctant to reveal his own personal details. Yuqian eventually blocked him on the app due to the lack of trust and honesty in the conversation. Context collapse enabled by proximity-based technology thus generates ambivalent experiences, simultaneously affording new possibilities for social connection while requiring heightened vigilance to safeguard personal safety and often resulting in communicative frustration and disappointment.

> I chatted with a teacher from my institution on the app. His profile picture was just a landscape photo. When we exchanged photos, I sent him mine, but he didn't want to send a photo and preferred to meet directly. At my request, he sent a flash photo (闪照). This is a feature on Blued where the photo only appears for a few seconds and can't be saved. He asked me many specific questions, like which department and faculty I was in, but when I asked him similar questions, he didn't answer. This kind of interaction felt unequal. I was being sincere, but he was hiding a lot and seemed to only want to have sex. His caution made me very uncomfortable, so I blocked him. In China, where the environment is unfriendly towards gay people, trust among us is very low, making communication inefficient and it's hard to develop reliable relationships. (Yuqian, 45, Associate Professor, Fujian province)

Although a high level of caution and avoidance characterized most participants' interactions with students on proximity-based gay apps, in some cases, these apps facilitated intimate relationships between teachers and students. Thanks to the context collapse facilitated by geosocial technology, gay academics and students were able to connect in ways that would not have been possible otherwise. However, these relationships were contentious within the public sphere, thereby posing significant risks for gay academics. They often worried about exposing their identities and facing institutional regulations, which led to mental conflict and necessitated careful considerations and efforts to conceal both their sexuality and their relationship.

> I think that if both the teacher and student agree, and there's no direct teaching relationship, an intimate relationship might be okay. But the environment is way stricter on teachers, so I'm super cautious. I've actually had sex with a senior who's about to graduate. I'm kind of taking a chance, thinking since he won't be around campus much longer, probably nothing bad will happen. I'm totally conflicted—I'm held back by my own moral constraints. I'm also terrified of someone finding out about my gay identity and this sexual relationship with a student. (Xiaohan, 33, Tutor, Guangdong province)

> I used to have a boyfriend I met through the app who was a student. When we went out for dinner or walks, we never stayed on our own campus. We went to another university campus nearby because we were always worried about being seen. (Liyuan, 31, Lecturer, Gansu province)

Instances of intimate or romantic relationships between gay academics and students reveal the participants' ambivalent and diverse experiences with proximity-based gay apps – experiences that extend far beyond concealment or misery. Framing these platforms solely as digital closets or sources of harm thus offers an oversimplified and incomplete narrative. Despite the agency demonstrated through identity negotiation, such portrayals risk underestimating participants' resilience and capacity to navigate heteronormativity and context collapse enabled by proximity-based technology. In the following section, we explore more empowering dimensions of these interactions and foreground the participants' expressions of digital queer agency in their engagement with and support for students.

Proximity-based gay apps as support tools

Facilitating connection and support through context collusions

While context collapse conflates multiple audiences into a single platform and, as demonstrated in the previous section, can produce consequences characterized by fear, caution, and identity management, it also presents opportunities for individuals to strategically leverage context collapse to foster connection, advocacy, or support for others. These intentional practices, conceptualized as *context collusion* (Davis and Jurgenson 2014), reveal a constructive dimension of context collapse. Several participants used Blued to engage with gay students on campus by sharing sexual health information, promoting queer activism, or providing a channel for help and consultation. For instance, after trying the HIV test kit himself, Dada shared how to get a free HIV test on Blued, so that gay students on his campus could also learn about sexual health.

> I ordered an HIV test kit online and found the process very convenient. On Blued, I shared a QR code for free test kits, along with the message: 'This app makes hookups easy—getting tested should be too.' Since I live in faculty housing, students on campus can see my posts. With rising HIV rates among university students, I hope sharing this info promotes sexual health awareness, even though I keep my teacher identity private on the app. (Dada, 30, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

Similarly, Liaofan, an art teacher who initially believed he lacked opportunities to address queer issues within his professional setting, discovered Blued as a strategic platform for promoting queer activism. As a local queer group coordinator, he leveraged the app to create meaningful connections between off-campus queer activities and the campus student community. In this instance of context collusion, proximity-based technology was intentionally used to collapse contexts – both between gay academics and students, and between off-campus activism and campus engagement. In an environment where

on-campus queer activism and support were subject to heavy surveillance and censorship by university authorities (Cui 2025a; Huang 2025), Liaofan's efforts circumvented institutional barriers to facilitate queer support for students.

> I work in the Art Department, teaching painting courses. I haven't come out to students or discussed queer topics in class because I haven't found the right opportunity. However, I use Blued to share queer information with gay students. I'm a coordinator for a local PFLAG4 group and share information about our activities on Blued. My Blued profile contains my real information and photo, but not my real name. When I use the app on campus, students can easily figure out that I'm a teacher because of my location. Through my posts, they can learn about PFLAG activities. So far, six gay students from my university have attended our events. (Liaofan, 38, Lecturer, Sichuan province)

In addition to sharing information about sexual health and queer group activities, proximity-based gay apps also enable context collusion by serving as platforms where gay academics can offer guidance to students struggling with their sexuality. For example, Xia encountered one of his students on Blued who was struggling to "cure" his sexuality. As both an educator and a trusted person whom the student admired, Xia encouraged the student to embrace his sexuality. The digital platform provided a critical safe space for context collusion, enabling a supportive interaction that would have been impossible in traditional offline settings, particularly given Xia's need to maintain his closeted status. The virtual space thus served as a unique conduit for identity affirmation and support.

> I saw one of my international students on Blued. Everything he posted on it was about me. For example, "He asked me how I was doing today. I was nervous and touched." So I knew he had a crush on me. I disclosed my identity to him and we promised to keep our gay identity confidential. Initially, he was shocked and asked why I told him this. He meant that I should keep a good image in his heart, and it's not good to be gay. As a Muslim, he didn't accept his gay identity. He once sent me a video about how people in his country used witchcraft to cure homosexuality. He wanted to go back to his country to do it. I told him that witchcraft was superstition and shouldn't be believed at all. I advised him to face up to and accept his identity. (Xia, 27, Tutor, Guangdong province)

Gay apps were not the only digital platforms through which gay academics could interact with and support gay students. Once connected with a student on gay apps, participants could switch to mainstream platforms for easier communication and social relationship development. This shift allowed their interactions to extend beyond gay apps and even into offline settings, fostering friendships. For example, Nongli connected with students he met on gay apps and added them on WeChat, enabling more convenient communication and fostering student support in his dual role as both teacher and potential friend. In this way, contextual collusion on gay apps facilitated the transition of these connections beyond the platform and from online interaction to offline engagement.

> I don't use my face photo on the app, but I do mention that I'm a teacher when chatting with students. To make communication easier, I added them on WeChat. Eventually, we even met in person—shared a meal and became friends. I think some students felt uneasy about their sexuality, so by talking to them as both a teacher and a friend, I hoped to provide them with a sense of security. (Nongli, 30, Lecturer, Hainan province)

Challenges of support due to context collisions

Participants' practices of context collusions – where they deliberately integrated separate audiences to foster connection and support for gay students – were not entirely positive. These strategic efforts were often accompanied by instances of *context collisions* (Davis and Jurgenson 2014), in which audiences unintentionally converged, resulting in discomfort and reputational vulnerability. While support and social connections between gay academics and students could be facilitated through purposeful context collusions, participants faced significant challenges in delivering support on these platforms. One barrier was the exposure of gay academics' personal identity, which might pose potential risks to their personal and professional lives. For instance, after publishing posts on Blued that revealed his teacher identity and willingness to support queer students, Huanghui was approached by numerous

students, with some attempting to identify him. Concerned about potential identity exposure, he ultimately deleted all related posts.

> I participated in the Rainbow Teacher Alliance event hosted by PFLAG in Guangzhou. After returning to my college, I posted messages on Blued supporting queer students, such as: "Rainbow teachers help you understand yourself. If you're facing bullying or struggling with self-acceptance, I'm here to help." A few students reached out daily—some seeking support, others curious about my identity. Despite adjusting my profile information to appear younger and shorter, several students still speculated, even naming teachers. Concerned about being identified, I eventually deleted the posts and stopped sharing content. (Huanghui, 37, Lecturer, Anhui province)

Participants' concerns about offering support on proximity-based gay apps were also shaped by the "chaotic" (乱) app environment and the unpredictable nature of context collapse. Unlike other dating apps that use matching algorithms to filter potential partners, participants described proximity-based apps as containing "a mix of good and bad people" (鱼龙混杂), making meaningful connections burdensome and time-consuming to pursue. In this sense, context collisions – moments when diverse audiences and social situations unwittingly crash into each other – could hinder participants' ability to focus on supporting gay students. For instance, with the intention of being openly supportive as a teacher and encouraging gay students, Linke initially used his real photo on Blued. However, he soon became overwhelmed by unsolicited messages from random users and subsequently removed his profile photo.

> When I first used Blued on campus, I used my real photo. If gay students saw me on the app and knew that a teacher was also gay, it would encourage them to accept their sexuality and feel that being gay is no big deal. Many gay students struggle with their identity, whether it's dealing with family issues or relationship problems. If they are willing to seek my help, I'm more than happy to support and guide them. However, it wasn't long before I removed my photo because too many people, including those who were not students, started greeting me. The app was chaotic and a mix of good and bad people, and you never know who you're dealing with. I didn't have time to keep socialising on it or reveal my real identity to random people. (Linke, 34, Associate Professor, Sichuan province)

Participants' attempts to support students faced significant challenges not only from factors related to their personal identity and the app environment, but also from China's growing restrictive political climate toward academics. As academic freedom continued to narrow and university authorities mandated strict adherence to party-state ideologies, gay academics found that openly supporting queer students has become a perilous political act that could jeopardize their professional safety. As shown below, under China's intensified enforcement of teachers' professional and moral guidelines (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2018) and expanding surveillance practices – including the encouragement of student reporting (Cui 2023c; Jiang 2023) – gay academics like Yuqian must refrain from offering student support or addressing queer-related topics in their teaching, fearing that any exposure could result in professional precarity.

> The government and universities are becoming increasingly strict about the teachers' code of morality (师德师风). The CCP Committee Secretary in my university often emphasises that teachers' behaviour and speech must align with official ideologies, or they will face disciplinary action. Queer topics are sensitive at universities, and they can get censored since they're viewed as going against official and traditional views on gender and sexuality. Universities now feel like big prisons and we're all under surveillance. Currently, there's a trend of student reporting and universities encourage students to report their teachers. For self-protection, I deliberately avoid discussing queer topics in class. I'm very cautious when using Blued. I avoid interacting with gay students and never use the app to support or help students, because doing so could easily expose my identity, make me a target of gossip, or be used against me. The leadership knows all the tricks to punish or dismiss people. If they want to punish someone, they can always find excuses (欲加之罪, 何患无辞). (Yuqian, 45, Associate Professor, Fujian province)

Yuqian's account illustrates that context collapse within an institutional and authoritarian setting is not merely an interpersonal issue but a structurally embedded risk. The audience convergence enabled by proximity-based apps unfolds within a politically charged and institutionally surveilled environment, where queer visibility can be interpreted as moral deviance or ideological misalignment. In this

context, the risk of exposure resulting from supporting queer students is not merely socially awkward but professionally hazardous, with institutional actors – such as party leadership, administrators, and student informants – actively participating in the disciplining of non-normative identities. This illustrates how context collapse, rather than simply an overlap of audiences, operates as a structural condition shaped by spatial intimacy, political ideology, and moral surveillance within Chinese higher education.

Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on the campus experiences of Chinese gay academics using proximity-based gay apps, this article has engaged with the concept of context collapse by illustrating its manifestations and impacts within localized institutional environments. Much of the existing literature conceptualizes context collapse as the blurring of discrete social domains, such as personal and professional identities, within online platforms that aggregate diverse audiences (Li et al. 2024; Marwick and Boyd 2011; Vitak 2012). However, this framework has primarily been applied to large-scale social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, where audiences might be imagined, asynchronous, and socially heterogeneous (Marwick and Boyd 2011). In contrast, our findings, grounded in the lived experiences of Chinese gay academics, illuminate a distinct form of context collapse shaped by geographic proximity and institutional co-presence. This form of context collapse emerges not through networked connection but through what Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott (2015) term "co-situation technology," which renders Chinese gay academics visible to proximate others within overlapping institutional and spatial contexts. This spatial immediacy situates users within a recognizable geography where gay individuals might appear within mere meters. Participants described checking nearby profiles with a mix of longing for connection and anxiety about risk, aware that the very proximity enabling connection could also threaten the fragile boundary between professional respectability and private life. This risk stems from the locative affordances of gay apps, which tie visibility to physical proximity rather than to socially connected audiences.

The visibility facilitated by proximity-based gay apps collapses not only social boundaries but also normative behavioral cues (Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott 2015). Situating gay app use within an institutional and authoritarian context, we have shown that context collapse on these platforms involves not only interpersonal negotiations but also the regulatory effects of top-down institutional power embedded in Chinese academics' professional lives. For participants, the tensions surrounding context collapse and identity management were intensified in Chinese university settings, where surveillance and censorship function to uphold ideological control and regulate queer visibility (Cui 2023a, 2023c; Cui and Burford 2025; Huang 2025). Unlike traditional conceptions of context collapse, which often involve uncertainty about one's imagined audience (Marwick and Boyd 2011), our participants navigated the risks of being visibly queer within a known academic community, alongside professional risks associated with being perceived as morally problematic (Cui and Burford 2025). As Duguay (2014) notes, the costs of context collapse are not distributed evenly; LGBTQ users face heightened consequences, including potential loss of employment, violence, or familial rejection – especially when their identities are marginalized or stigmatized (p. 7). Our findings extend this analysis to Chinese academic contexts, documenting student harassment, workplace self-censorship, and job-security anxieties arising from institutional-political controls (see also Cui 2023a, 2023c). These findings reveal how context collapse on proximity-based gay apps functions not just as a technical feature but as an embodied professional risk within China's ideologically constrained academic environments.

This article has also explored how individuals navigate context collapse within a constrained environment by unpacking the diverse identity management strategies employed by participants in their use of gay apps. While Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott (2015) highlight how context collapse generates tension in users' self-presentation on location-aware gay dating apps, our participants responded to context collapse with even more cautious strategies – not only adjusting how they

presented themselves on the app, but also actively avoiding app usage in particular spaces to prevent recognition by students and colleagues. As such, identity management among Chinese gay academics was not a matter of being closeted or out, but a dynamic and context-sensitive process. Participants made careful decisions based on specific spatial conditions (e.g., being on campus), perceived audience (e.g., the likelihood of being seen by students), and temporal factors (e.g., whether it was during winter or summer breaks). As Li et al. (2024) note in their study of managing context collapse on Wechat, users often engage in "context restoration" to reestablish psychological, spatial, and temporal boundaries between social roles through strategies to manage heterogeneous audiences and preserve a sense of separation between personal and professional domains. Our participants similarly engaged in avoiding app use on campus, limiting interactions, and carefully controlling their self-presentation to manage their visibility on gay apps. Echoing the identity-management strategies employed by Chinese gay academics in offline campus interactions (Cui 2022), our participants' digital strategies were shaped within a climate marked by institutionalized queerphobia and heteronormativity (Cui and Burford 2025), alongside pervasive surveillance and censorship in Chinese higher education (Cui 2023a, 2023c; Huang 2025). Within this environment, identity management in response to context collapse was not merely a matter of personal preference or interpersonal negotiation, but a structurally conditioned response. Participants' cautious yet deliberate negotiations of involuntary context collapse illustrate their capacity to exercise situated agency within constraint, revealing how users actively reconstruct contextual boundaries under conditions of limited control.

Despite these challenges on personal, social, and political levels, our participants managed to use proximity-based gay apps to provide mentorship, share sexual health information, and promote queer activism – instances of intentional "context collusions" (Davis and Jurgenson 2014) wherein users deliberately integrated previously segmented audiences or identity facets to serve strategic aims. By leveraging proximity-based technology to connect with gay students who shared a physical context yet remained largely invisible to gay academics in offline spaces, participants discreetly offered guidance and support – often to individuals who might otherwise have lacked access to queer-affirming resources (Cui 2025a). These acts resemble what Duguay (2020) terms "off-label use," where dating apps are appropriated for purposes beyond their conventional romantic or sexual functions. However, such efforts were fragile and often short-lived. Participants reported being approached by unknown users, speculated on by students, overwhelmed by unsolicited attention, and concerned about increasingly stringent university regulations, prompting them to delete posts or withdraw from the platform altogether. These interruptions – examples of "context collisions" (Davis and Jurgenson 2014) – illustrate how the collapse of distinct social roles within shared digital-physical space disrupted participants' ability to maintain control over their visibility and intentions for support. By juxtaposing participants' experiences of both intentional context collusions and unintentional context collisions in their student support, this study complicates prevailing understandings of context collapse, showing that its outcomes can be simultaneously mixed, fluid, and dynamic – and therefore difficult to categorize neatly based on intentionality.

By tracing these cautious and situational uses of dating apps, our study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of queer digital agency, and complicates common perceptions of dating apps by highlighting their potential – even if limited and fraught – for facilitating cautious forms of relational support and queer connection. These moments of supporting gay students through proximity-based apps, while contending with anxiety around potential risks, echo tensions explored in queer scholarship beyond digital contexts. Rohleder and Walsh (2025), for example, conceptualize gay men's experiences of public displays of affection in the UK as "psychosocial dilemmas." Appreciating the social dynamics as well as the psychic experiences at play in shaping gay individuals' experiences, psychosocial dilemmas highlight "a complex interplay of psychological and social dimensions that does not resolve easily" (Rohleder and Walsh 2025:317). By juxtaposing these moments of psychosocial dilemmas and their attempts to interrupt heteronormativity, we illuminate the invisible impact of heteronormativity and institutional regulation on Chinese gay academics' professional lives, as well as their engagement in

"soft resistance" (Cui and Burford 2025) or "invisible activism" (Bernot, Yang, and Davies 2024). As Bernot, Yang, and Davies (2024:13) articulate, invisible activism "involves small actions that might not directly influence politics or be known publicly beyond the community," but could "build social bonds that strengthen community resilience and could lead to future social change."

The study has several implications for future research. First, as a qualitative inquiry situated within a clearly delineated sociopolitical context, this study restricts its analytical focus to the experiences of gay male academics during Xi Jinping's presidency in authoritarian China, and therefore does not seek to generalize its findings beyond the specific historical, institutional, and political conditions under examination. Future research could extend the study of queer dating apps into more diverse professional, institutional, national, and political contexts, generating richer and more nuanced empirical and theoretical insights into how social media practices intersect with social, organizational, and political environments. Second, for researchers interested in the Chinese context, future work could further examine the role of political forces in shaping queer dating app use within institutional settings. While this article provides a general overview of the political climate facing Chinese gay academics, its scope and focus do not allow for a detailed examination of the specific political techniques employed by authorities that shape their professional lives and digital experiences. During the period in which this study was conducted, China's political climate continued to shift. While this study has highlighted gay academics' perceptions of restrictive campus environments shaped by political and ideological control in Chinese higher education, these constraints have intensified in recent years (Jiang 2023; Pringle and Woodman 2022). Beyond the campus, China removed two major gay dating apps – Blued and Finka – from Apple and Android stores in 2025 following directives from the Cyberspace Administration of China (Zhang 2025), signaling a further contraction of queer digital spaces and an intensification of state-led social control. The government's broader crackdown on civil society and queer organizations has led to the "covert re-criminalisation" of queer activist groups, intensified moral scrutiny of their online visibility, and mounting political pressure on queer activism (Bernot, Yang, and Davies 2024). Taken together, the tightening academic environment, the constricting digital landscape, and the shrinking space for civil society raise important questions about how these shifting political forces shape queer individuals' digital experiences on campus. Understanding the extent to which queer digital agency and resistance remain possible – and examining how they emerge, evolve, and manifest – continues to be an essential avenue for future research.

Notes

1. The term *queer* holds multiple meanings and is used in different ways by scholars (Burford and Allen 2018). In this paper, queer serves as an umbrella term for non-normative gender and sexual identities, as well as a theoretical framework – namely, queer theory.
2. Coined and widely employed by queer theorists, *heteronormativity* refers to the relations and practices that produce and promote heterosexuality as natural, desirable and privileged. While global research has examined the manifestation of heteronormativity in the workplace (Cui 2025b, 2026), queer studies within the context of Chinese workplaces remain scarce – a gap this article seeks to address.
3. Finka (Chinese name: 翻咔) is a popular gay dating app in China that uses a Tinder-like swipe mechanism for matching. It was previously known as Aloha, which launched in 2014 before rebranding as Finka in 2019. Finka uses an intelligent recommendation algorithm to match users based on shared interests. Users can choose whether to enable location permissions in order to access proximity-based features, such as viewing or being recommended people nearby. In 2025, both Finka and Blued were removed from Chinese app stores following orders from regulatory authorities (Zhang 2025).
4. PFLAG China (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, 同性恋亲友会) is a nationwide LGBTQ+ support organization in mainland China. It began in Guangzhou in 2008 as an NGO dedicated to helping LGBTQ+ people and their families understand, support, and accept one another. In 2021, the organization rebranded as True Self (出色伙伴).

Author contributions

CRediT: **Taylor Le Cui:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Runze Ding:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability

The data from this research is not publicly available due to ethical requirements to protect participants.

Ethical approval

This research gained ethics approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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