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Beyond 1 and 0: Unpacking the Lived Meanings of “Side” In Chinese Gay Men’s Semiotic Match-Making System

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ABSTRACT

The “1/0” (Top/Bottom) system has long dominated Chinese gay culture, functioning as a rigid semiotic infrastructure that organizes sexual roles through heteronormative gender norms and hegemonic masculinity. The recent emergence of “Side” – a label for men who primarily engage in non-penetrative sex – poses a disruption to this binary order. Drawing on constructivist grounded theory and in-depth interviews with 15 gay men in China who identified as or practiced “Side,” this study unpacks the lived meanings of this identity within a digitalized match-making landscape. Our findings reveal that “Side” is constructed not merely as a sexual preference, but as a multifaceted strategy of well-being, resistance, and digital agency. First, participants articulated “Side” as a praxis of bodily comfort and psychological safety, shifting the paradigm from a performance-oriented “homosexist” script to a well-being-centric ethos. Second, “Side” functions as a discursive shield against the effeminophobia and internalized hierarchies inherent in the 1/0 system, challenging the reproduction of patriarchal power dynamics in same-sex intimacy. Finally, within the algorithmic environment of dating apps, “Side” is deployed as a tactical tool for “data gaming,” allowing individuals to strategically navigate visibility and manage relational expectations. By decoupling sexual legitimacy from penetrative acts, the rise of “Side” suggests an important and still unfolding development in contemporary Chinese gay communities, one that opens space for more flexible and well-being-centered understandings of intimacy.

Introduction: The Emergence of “Side” In a Labelled Gay Culture

Chinese gay male culture has long navigated through a complex taxonomy of labels, a tradition that has evolved significantly in its focus, from terms describing social identities and relationships to a lexicon demarcating sexual roles. Early records from the pre-Han (c. 2100–206 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) periods documented same-sex relations through allusions like *Longyang* and *Duanxiu*, which named the emotional bonds between emperors and their male favorites (Kang, 2009). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, terms such as *Xiang’gong* and *Nanji* emerged, reflecting a context where same-sex practices were often structured by class and age hierarchies (Chou, 2000). The modern introduction of *tongxinglian* (homosexual) in the twentieth century marked a pivotal shift, imposing a Western medical-psychological identity framework that pathologizes the individual rather than describing their acts or relationships (Kong, 2010). It is only in the contemporary era, fueled by social media and digital communication, that the focus has crystallized around a detailed nomenclature for sexual roles, moving from describing who one is in a social sense to explicitly codifying what one does in a sexual encounter.

Over the past two decades, the proliferation of dating apps and social media has further entrenched the 1/0 numerical system as the dominant lexicon for articulating sexual roles

among Chinese gay men (Wang, 2020), with emerging labels, such as “Side,” showing the potential to challenge this status quo. On the surface, the 1/0 system parallels global gay male lexicons such as the “top/bottom” dichotomy in English or the “activo/passivo” roles in Latin cultures, providing a seemingly universal logic for sexual positioning. A social-semiotic perspective reveals its symbolic foundation: the Arabic numbers 1 and 0 function as visual metaphors, much like the characters 凸 (convex) and 凹 (concave) in Japanese BL (Boys’ Love) culture, iconically representing penetrating and receptive roles (McLelland, 2000). Within this numerical framework, “1” denotes the insertive role and “0” the receptive, with “0.5,” the arithmetic mean on this spectrum, signifying versatility. However, the 1/0 system has transcended its function as a mere descriptor of sexual practice and evolved into a pervasive social and relational logic, a normative framework that structures desire, shapes user profiles on platforms like *Blued* and *Fanka* (China’s two largest gay dating apps), and governs the algorithms of intimacy (Wang, 2020). Thus, it operates not just as a vocabulary for sexual roles, but as a powerful semiotic system that organizes identity and match-making within the Chinese gay community.

While providing a common language, the 1/0 system carries a set of expectations that reinforce a rigid gender binary. It has created an internal hierarchy where sexual role labels are deeply intertwined with ideologies of masculinity. As recent research illustrates, hegemonic masculinity remains a powerful

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narrative within Chinese gay communities, privileging the masculine-presenting “1’s” who embody dominant, often heteronormative, gender traits, while feminized “0’s” are frequently subject to stigma and desexualization (Kong, 2019, 2021; Zhou, 2023). This hierarchy transforms the 1/0 spectrum from a simple catalog of preferences into a stratified match-making game, where one’s label can significantly impact their social and sexual capital.

Within this entrenched and hierarchical labeling system, the identity of “Side” has recently emerged and gained traction among Chinese gay men. Coined in 2013 by American psychotherapist Joe Kort, the term was designed to affirm gay men whose primary sexual interests lie outside penetrative sex (Kort, 2016). For nearly a decade, “Side” remained a niche term circulating primarily within Anglophone online forums. Its journey into the global, and subsequently Chinese, mainstream was accelerated by two pivotal events in 2022: the viral spread of the comedian Michael Henry’s YouTube video, “I’m a Side” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLNx6ty8S-M>), which challenges stereotypes about men who engage in non-penetrative sex (Bollas, 2024), swiftly followed by an institutional endorsement the next month when the world’s largest queer dating app, Grindr, officially added “Side” to its profile options (Farber, 2022). This combination of cultural representation and platform integration catalyzed the term’s rapid globalization and localization within Chinese digital spaces. Domestic platforms such as *Blued* and *Fanka* soon incorporated the label, while discussions, memes, and guides about “Side” flourished on Xiaohongshu, Zhihu, and Weibo, cementing its place in the contemporary Chinese gay lexicon (e.g., Yuzi Almert, 2024; Zhihu User, 2024). The emergence of “Side” thus marks a significant cultural moment, posing a potential challenge to the penetration-centric norms upheld by the 1/0 system.

In the Western context, Bollas (2024) drew on the concept of “homosexism” – an internal hierarchy that privileges anal intercourse as the only legitimate sexual expression – to critique how this hierarchy reinforces hegemonic masculinity in gay men’s culture. He argued that homosexuality validates the “top” role through its alignment with heterosexual scripts, and the “bottom” role by framing endurance of pain as a reclaiming of masculinity, while marginalizing both non-penetrative sexual acts and individuals who practice and/or identify as “Side.” Although emerging Western scholarship has begun to examine how the “Side” identity intersects with homosexual hegemony, its meaning within the specific context of Chinese gay culture remains underexplored.

As Freestone’s (2025) recent work on queer Sinophone male identities reminds us, sexual and gendered categories are not universal but are discursively negotiated within local linguistic, ideological, and semiotic systems. From this perspective, identity is a performative and communicative process, continually shaped by the norms and discourses of its specific context. Building on this understanding, our study treats “Side” not as a stable and static label transplanted from global queer lexicons, but as a discursive and cultural event whose meaning is actively negotiated by Chinese gay men navigating a semiotic order dictated by the 1/0 system. This study therefore investigated the following overarching

question: *How do Chinese gay men make sense of “Side?”* We aimed to explore how this relatively new identity is interpreted and endowed with meaning in relation to established norms of sexual labeling, identity, and matchmaking within contemporary Chinese gay culture.

Literature Review

Sexual Positioning and Power Among Gay Men

Prior research has established that sexual practices and role labels are deeply intertwined with the identity formation and power dynamics of gay men (Dube, 2000; Johns et al., 2012; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018). Classical sexual identity development models have long posited that sexual behavior acts as a primary catalyst in the coming-out process (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). For instance, Dube (2000) highlighted a “sex-centered” trajectory, where many gay men rely on same-sex sexual encounters (traditionally presumed as penetrative sex) to understand, confirm, and label their sexual identity. Within these penetrative encounters, the division of sexual roles, namely “top” (insertive) and “bottom” (receptive), is rarely neutral but heavily saturated with heteronormative gender scripts.

Scholars have consistently demonstrated that hegemonic masculinity profoundly shapes these sexual positions (Moskowitz & Hart, 2011; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018). The “top” role is frequently ascribed characteristics associated with dominance, physical strength, and normative masculinity, whereas the “bottom” role is often stigmatized through associations with passivity, submissiveness, and femininity (Cao, 2023; Kippax & Smith, 2001). As Reilly (2016) argued, this power imbalance results in a form of social censure and “anti-effeminacy” within the gay community, where the term “bottom” is sometimes weaponized as a slur to denigrate feminine characteristics. This compels many gay men to hyper-masculinize their appearance and behavior (i.e., defeminize) to avoid “bottom-shaming.” In response to this rigid, gendered hierarchy, many gay men seek alternative ways to negotiate intimacy and power. Johns et al. (2012) found that young gay men often critique these conventional gender norms, idealizing “versatility” (engaging in both insertive and receptive roles) as the ultimate pathway to egalitarian intimacy. For these men, versatility represents a conscious deviation from the polarized power imbalances of the top/bottom dichotomy, allowing for fluid power-sharing and reciprocal pleasure (Johns et al., 2012).

The Cultural Meanings of the 1/0 System

The 1/0 numerical system serves as the primary semiotic framework for articulating sexual roles and social identities within Chinese gay men’s communities (Zheng et al., 2012; L. Zheng et al., 2015). While superficially analogous to the “top/bottom” lexicon in Western contexts, this system is profoundly shaped by local cultural imperatives, transforming it from a mere descriptor of sexual practice into a complex system of social classification imbued with gendered ideologies. The system’s cultural significance manifests first in its deep entanglement

with heteronormative gender frameworks. Zheng's (2015) ethnographic work illustrated that the 1/0 system provides a cultural script for socialization, where new members often adopt roles mirroring the husband/wife binary. While critiqued for reinforcing a static binary (Wei, 2016), Zheng's (2015) perspective crucially pointed out the system's fundamental embeddedness in gendered meaning-making.

This gendered dimension becomes further complicated through its intersection with contemporary Chinese gay masculinities. Kong's (2019, 2020) generational research demonstrated how Chinese gay men in modern times negotiate a neoliberal entrepreneurial masculinity that emphasizes individual success, competition, and self-responsibilities. Quantitative evidence also supports that stereotypes about gender and masculinity may account for the links between sexual self-labels and partner choice in both sexual self-labeling and preferred labeling of partners based on masculinity among gay and bisexual men (Zheng, 2021). Within this socioeconomic context, the 1/0 system emerges as a crucial arena for performing and negotiating manhood. The "1" role particularly aligns with hegemonic masculine traits, assertiveness, independence, and protectiveness, making it a coveted identity that satisfies both community desirability and broader societal expectations (Kong, 2020).

As observed in Zhou's (2023) study, the tension between the rigid binary and individual experiences of sexual fluidity has led to the emergence of "0.5" as a spectral category. This development indicates an attempt to carve out space beyond the strict 1/0 dichotomy. Nevertheless, the community's deep-seated adherence to heteronormative gender roles and hegemonic masculinity restricts this fluidity. Zhou (2023) conceptualized this through the notion of an "unequal threshold," in which a legitimate "1" status demands sexual potency, virile self-presentation, and socioeconomic capability, whereby the ambiguity of "0.5" is often perceived not as versatility but as an inability to meet the standards of a "1." As a result, through stringent "other-identification," individuals who identify as "0.5" are often reassigned to the category of "0," while those identified as "1" who are seen as falling short of masculine norms are marginalized with labels such as "mu 1" (effeminate 1). This pattern illustrates how the spectral category, instead of effectively challenging the binary, ends up reinforcing the hierarchical structure it ostensibly complicates.

Overall, the 1/0 system's cultural meaning is characterized by this fundamental paradox: while nominally evolving from a rigid binary to include spectral categories, it operates ultimately as a potent hierarchy sustained by heteronormative gender norms and hegemonic masculinities. Possessing a "1" identity and desirable masculinities confer significant social and sexual capital, while those identified as "0" and "mu 1" face stigmatization and effeminophobia (Kong, 2020; Zhou, 2023). The proliferation of dating apps and social media has further reified these cultural meanings, transforming the system from an informal lexicon into a formalized digital match-making logic that structures desire and governs intimate connections on platforms such as *Blued* (Miao & Chan, 2021; Wang, 2020). This established hierarchy forms the essential backdrop against which the emergent identity of "Side" must be understood.

The 1/0 System in the Age of Mobile Dating

With the proliferation of mobile dating technologies, the 1/0 division has been further reconfigured through processes of datafication and algorithmic mediation. As Wang (2020) reminded us, the datafied gay man is not a recent invention of software engineers but the result of a longer genealogy of self-coding practices in Chinese gay cyberculture. Before the emergence of mobile apps, gay men on QQ chatrooms already described themselves through the numeric "condition (qingkuang)," a shorthand combining age, height, weight, and sexual role. This vernacular form of self-datafication transformed intimacy into quantifiable information long before algorithms intervened and created a cultural expectation that visibility and desirability should be measurable. Apps such as *Blued* have formalized and automated this logic, turning community conventions into an infrastructural requirement for participation.

Within *Blued's* interface, these quantified attributes are organized through the filter function, where users can search by age, body type, or verification status. Yet among all the filtering subjects, sexual role remains the "priority among priorities" (Wang, 2020). Users frequently exclude those who share the same role, describing the practice as efficient, direct, and normal. This design renders sex roles a technical grammar of interaction, determining who becomes visible, who disappears, and who counts as a desirable match. Zheng and Xu's (2025) research demonstrated that digital infrastructures do not merely compute desire but actively codify it. Their analysis of 188,716 *Blued* profiles reveals clear alignments between role and body type, showing muscular tops preferring slimmer partners and slim bottoms seeking muscular ones. In this context, "slim" often connotes a feminized and youthful aesthetic, evoking cultural ideals of softness and passivity that contrast with the masculinity and dominance associated with the top (Zheng & Xu, 2025). This pairing pattern, therefore, highlights how digital infrastructure reproduces a match-making logic that naturalizes gendered binary and hegemonic masculinities.

At the same time, users actively negotiate these hierarchies. Many deliberately modify their sexual role labels on dating apps, shifting from "0" or "0.5" to "1" to attract more attention and messages. As Wang (2020) conceptualized it, such practices exemplify "data gaming" within an environment of algorithmic sociality, where users learn to manipulate self-representation for algorithmic visibility. Sexual roles therefore function both as normative codes and as strategic resources. These findings echo Ding's (2020) argument that gay men tend to perform 1-ness or versatility as tactics within the neoliberalized and gamified dating culture, reinforcing while also tactically navigating the hierarchies of desirability. In this sense, the 1/0 system operates as a hybrid structure of governance and performance, simultaneously disciplining desire and enabling users to play, reproduce, and navigate the algorithmic hierarchies of China's gay digital culture.

Research Question

Previous scholarship has shown that sexual role labels are never merely descriptive. In both Western and Chinese contexts, they are deeply implicated in identity formation, gendered

hierarchies, and sexual decision making, and in contemporary Chinese gay culture these dynamics are further intensified by the 1/0 semiotic match-making system and its platformed, datafied circulation. At the same time, most existing studies have focused on established penetrative role labels and their associated masculinities, leaving underexamined how an emergent label such as “Side” is interpreted, inhabited, and negotiated in everyday life. Rather than assuming that “Side” simply escapes the existing 1/0 order, this study investigated whether and how it confirms, complicates, or partially reworks the dominant logics of sexual positioning, masculinity, and digital matchmaking. Accordingly, this study asked: *How do Chinese gay men make sense of “Side” in relation to other sexual role labels, particularly 1/0, in the semiotic match-making system?*

Method

Research Approach

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to investigate how Chinese gay men make sense of the “Side” identity. Grounded theory is particularly suited for this research as it is designed to generate theory from data systematically, especially in areas where existing frameworks are insufficient to explain emerging social phenomena (Charmaz, 2014). Given that “Side” is a relatively new and under-explored concept within the Chinese context, we did not begin with a rigid theoretical framework to test. Instead, we allowed the participants’ experiences and narratives to guide our understanding, aiming to develop a substantive theory about the meaning and function of “Side” that is grounded in the data itself. The process involved simultaneous data generation and analysis, constant comparative analysis to develop and refine codes and categories, and memo-writing to theorize the relationships between concepts as they emerged. To operationalize this approach, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews for data generation and employed reflexive thematic analysis for data analysis.

Researcher Positionality

As both researchers identify as members of the Chinese gay community and critical scholars, our positionality is integral to this study. This insider status facilitated access and trust

(Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), enabling richer, more candid discussions about sensitive topics like sexual practice and community norms. Concurrently, our training as critical scholars compels us to maintain a reflexive stance. We acknowledge that our insider perspective is both a strength and a site of potential bias. To mitigate this, we engaged in continuous dialogue throughout the research process, consciously questioning our assumptions and striving to represent the diversity of experiences within our participant group, rather than projecting a singular, homogenized narrative. To operationalize this, we maintained individual reflexive journals to document our reactions and track how our interpretations evolved. We also engaged in ongoing peer-debriefing sessions to challenge each other’s coding decisions and actively seek disconfirming evidence. Memo-writing (Charmaz, 2014) further supported reflexivity by creating an auditable trail of our analytical decisions.

Procedure

The data for this study were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 Chinese gay men who identified as “Side” or engaged in side practices (see Table 1 for participant information, including pseudonym, age, profession, sexual experiences and preference). A queer peer approach (Queen, 2014) was primarily employed for recruitment, leveraging the researchers’ established queer social networks to identify potential participants. This method was chosen for its effectiveness in building trust and accessing communities that may be cautious of external researchers. To supplement this and ensure a broader reach, recruitment posters were also circulated on prominent Chinese online social media platforms, including WeChat groups, WeChat moments, and Xiaohongshu.

An initial screening survey was distributed to 24 interested individuals to collect basic personal information and assess their suitability for the study’s focus. Of these, 18 respondents met the criteria and agreed to participate in the interview and potential follow-up research activities (though the latter are not part of the present analysis). Ultimately, 15 participants completed the semi-structured interviews, with each session lasting between 60 and 105 minutes, resulting in a total of approximately 1,200 minutes of recorded dialogue.

Table 1. Participant information (age, profession, sexual experiences and preferences).

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Profession	Penetrative sex experiences	Non-penetrative sex experiences (Side)	Sexual preference
Jiahao	30	Advertising	Yes	Yes	No preference
Lucas	22	Student	Yes	Yes	Side
Jack	22	Artist/Game Developer	Yes	Yes	Side
Sames	26	Tech Hardware	Yes	Yes	Side
CC	29	IT/Programming	Yes	Yes	No preference
Tutu	28	Higher Education	Yes	Yes	Side
Sangsang	23	Marketing	Yes	Yes	Side
Chai	28	Pharmaceutical	Yes	Yes	Side
Ben	30	Human Resource	Yes	Yes	No preference
Yuxuan	27	Psychologist	Yes	Yes	Side
Het	45	Freelancer	Yes	Yes	Side
Gugu	22	Student	Yes	Yes	Side
QQ	38	Education	No	Yes	Side
Mu	26	Student	Yes	Yes	No preference
Nino	28	Transportation	No	Yes	Side

Our approach to qualitative interviewing was informed by a discursive perspective that conceptualizes interviews not as neutral data extraction but as socially situated speech events. Following scholars such as Mishler (1986), we understand the interview as a context where knowledge is co-generated through the interaction and interrelationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Consequently, the data are treated as neither purely subjective nor objective, but as interactive and intersubjective constructs (Kvale, 1996; Mason, 2002).

Guided by this framework, the interview protocol was designed to stimulate discursive knowledge around several key areas. These included: (1) participants' personal backgrounds (e.g., age, profession, familial context); (2) their broader experiences as gay men in both Chinese society and within the local queer community; and, centrally, (3) their personal views on "Side," their narratives of practicing non-penetrative sex, and their ongoing negotiations of what "Side" means for their own identity and for the community at large. A critical line of questioning specifically explored the meaning of "Side" in relation to other established sexual role labels, particularly the dominant 1/0 system, to understand how this new identity is positioned and made sense of within the existing semiotic landscape of the Chinese gay community.

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the native language of both participants and researchers. Analysis was primarily conducted on the original Chinese transcripts to preserve linguistic and cultural nuances. The quotes presented in this article were translated into English by the authors, who are both bilingual and bicultural. Translation was an iterative and reflexive process, prioritizing conceptual equivalence over literal translation (Cameron, 2001). Where necessary, we have included the original Chinese text alongside the English translation to allow multilingual readers to assess our interpretations.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kong, 2019) was employed to systematically identify and analyze patterns from the interview data. The two authors began by independently coding the interview transcripts to identify patterns in how participants described their experiences with "Side" and their stated reasons for this preference. These initial codes were then synthesized through discussion to develop and refine overarching themes. Informed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), our analysis operated at both semantic and latent levels. At the semantic level, we cataloged the practices participants associated with "Side" and their explicit motivations for embracing the label. At the latent level, we examined how participants' narratives, including their linguistic choices, metaphors, and ways of positioning themselves in relation to the 1/0 system, reflected broader social discourses on gender, sexuality, and masculinity in contemporary China. This interpretive move allowed us to connect individual accounts to macro-level cultural logics (such as hegemonic masculinity and effeminophobia) that shape the 1/0 system and position "Side" within it. From these thematic patterns, we moved to theoretical abstraction by examining relationships between themes – for instance, how discourses of bodily

comfort intersected with narratives of psychological liberation, and how both related to participants' critiques of the 1/0 hierarchy. Through constant comparative analysis and memo-writing (Charmaz, 2014), we developed higher-order conceptual categories, including well-being, resistance, strategic transpositioning, that form the substantive theory presented in this paper.

Findings: Negotiating "Side" Within a Semiotic Match-Making System

The analysis of interview data revealed that "Side" is not merely an additional label in the existing vocabulary of sexual roles, but a reconfiguration of how intimacy, pleasure, and identity are understood within the Chinese gay community. Participants' accounts show that the meaning of "Side" emerges through everyday negotiations situated within a semiotic landscape long shaped by the 1/0 system. This section traces the contours of this emerging identity by first exploring participants' motivations for embracing "Side," then examining how "Side" is negotiated in relation to the dominant 1/0 system.

Why "Side": Motivations and Practices

At the most basic level, participants consistently described "Side" as sexual practices that do not involve penetration, including kissing, hugging, oral sex, and various kink activities. However, their reflections on why they choose to be or do "Side" reveal meanings that reach beyond the sexual practice dimension. Their decisions represent a deliberate pursuit of well-being, converging around three core dimensions: prioritizing bodily comfort and pragmatism, seeking psychological liberation from masculine performance, and reconfiguring intimacy toward egalitarian connection.

Prioritizing Bodily Comfort and Pragmatism

For many participants, the choice of "Side" was fundamentally grounded in a rational negotiation of the body: its risks, its labor, and its sensations. This dimension consolidates concerns about health risks, logistical convenience, and the avoidance of physical pain.

First, health-related concerns appeared throughout participants' accounts, especially in relation to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Lucas captured this awareness succinctly:

主要就是可能也是目前社会环境下,我觉得插入性行为多少就是会有一些高危的成分在,比如性病传播,现在越来越多了。

Mainly, considering the current social environment, I think penetrative sex to some degree carries a certain level of risk, like STI transmission—which seems increasingly common nowadays.

Second, participants emphasized the practical ease of "Side" practices compared to the laborious nature of penetrative sex. Jack elaborated on the logistical burden he avoids:

对于性少数群体来说,传统插入行为需要很多准备,但像口交这样的情况下,其实准备工作不是很大。

For sexual minorities, penetrative sex often requires extensive preparation, but for activities like oral sex, the preparation is minimal.

Finally, for some, this pragmatic choice is a direct response to negative or painful bodily experiences with penetrative sex. Sangsang vividly recalled how a traumatic early encounter shaped his rejection of penetration:

最早的时候还是在高中，但是没有成功，还很痛。那个时候就埋下了一些对1/0的阴影。这也是我后来更愿意把 Side 作为一个身份标签的原因之一。

My first attempt [for penetrative sex] was in high school, but it didn't go well and hurt a lot. That experience left a shadow around 1/0 to me. That's one reason I later preferred identifying myself as a Side.

Psychological Liberation from Masculine Performance

Beyond physical concerns, “Side” offers significant psychological relief by dismantling the performance pressures inherent in the gendered hierarchy of the 1/0 system. The role of the “1,” in particular, is tied to a hegemonic masculinity that demands sexual potency and virility. Jiahao's narrative powerfully illustrates this mental strain. He described the intense, self-imposed pressure to perform as a top:

我做一的时候，会给自己做心理建设：这次一定不要阳痿，一定要坚挺一点。

When I top, I always have to psych myself up—telling myself not to go soft this time, must stay firm.

Jiahao's later reflection that “我觉得做Side会比做其他的插入性行为给我更少负担” (I think doing Side gives me less burden than other penetrative sex) shows that the “Side” identity functions as a form of psychological reprieve. It suspends the imperative to perform a scripted masculinity, creating a sexual environment where adequacy is not measured by erection maintenance or penetrative duration. This liberation from the performance anxiety inherent in the 1/0 script is a central motivation for many who prefer doing “Side” or identifying as “Side.”

Reconfiguring Intimacy Toward Egalitarian Connection

The final dimension reflects a deeper desire to transform the relational logic of sex itself. Participants framed “Side” as a conscious move away from the dominance-submission dynamic they associated with penetrative roles and toward an intimacy defined by safety, reciprocity, and emotional presence. This reconfiguration manifests at two distinct levels.

First, participants rejected hierarchical power dynamics embedded in traditional sexual scripts. Jiahao explained this shift in explicitly moral and psychological terms, defining “Side” by what it rejects:

一个心理学上的定义就是一定不包含征服与被征服。

In psychological terms, it (Side) definitely does not include conquest or being conquered.

This rejection of hierarchy is closely tied to the desire for an equal footing, as highlighted by Gugu:

我觉得可以说是把两个人身份来说，相当于放到一个平等，或者说尽可能的对等的位置。

I think it's about placing both partners on an equal—or at least as equal as possible—ground.

Second, this egalitarian framework enabled the cultivation of emotional safety and affective connection. The absence of hierarchical positioning created space for intimacy characterized by psychological security and the experience of “being loved.” Jiahao described this physiological and emotional sensation:

让我有一种安全感，就是那种谈恋爱的感觉。两个人互相接吻的时候，感觉可能也很像类似，我被拥抱了，就分泌了很多催产素。

It gives me a sense of security—the feeling of being in love. When we kiss each other, it feels like that . . . When I'm being hugged, I can feel the oxytocin flowing.

Similarly, Tutu framed “Side” not just as a sexual act, but as an affective state:

不是单纯的性这一块儿的体验，对，我会觉得[Side]是一种被爱的那种体验吧。

It's not purely a sexual experience; Yes, I'd say it [Side] is a way of feeling loved.

In these views, the choice of “Side” is a move away from the power-laden scripts of the 1/0 binary toward an intimacy characterized by reciprocal care, neurochemical bonding, and emotional connection.

Overall, the motivations detailed here demonstrate that “Side” operates not merely as a category of sexual practice, but as a critical lexicon through which participants articulate a reflective stance toward the very structure of intimacy. Their accounts consistently engage with, and seek alternatives to, the power dynamics, performance pressures, and emotional limitations inherent in the 1/0 semiotic system. It is precisely this critical relationship that positions “Side” as a site of active negotiation with the established 1/0 order, a dynamic process we explore in the following section.

The Relationship Between “Side” And 1/0 in the Semiotic Match-Making System

While “Side” denotes a set of non-penetrative sexual practices, its cultural significance is deeply entangled with the established semiotic order of the 1/0 system. Participants' narratives revealed that “Side” does not exist outside this system but interacts with it in complex ways: as a form of resistance to its effeminophobia, as a parallel system of self-identification, and as a strategic tool for navigating the digital match-making landscape.

“Side” As Resistance to Effeminophobia Upheld in the 1/0 System

Participants widely recognized that the 1/0 binary is not simply a classification of sexual positions, but a system deeply embedded in gendered hierarchies. Within this architecture, hegemonic masculinity, embodied by the “1,” operates as

a form of social and sexual capital, while feminized expression, often associated with “0,” becomes the target of stigma and marginalization. This systemic effeminophobia – the devaluation of traits and behaviors perceived as feminine – structures desire, social standing, and even self-perception within the community. Many participants described experiencing or internalizing bottom-shaming and effeminophobia, which profoundly shaped their sense of self and their participation in the gay community.

Sangsang’s reflection vividly captures this internalization:

比较典型的的就是 bottom shame。就是在青春期的时候,可能初中阶段。那个时候我也会不自觉地被周围的直男带着走。即使自己是‘娘娘腔’,但在面对同样是娘娘腔的同学时,我也会心生鄙夷。我不知道这是对自我的一种厌恶还是……

A typical experience is bottom-shaming. In my adolescent years, probably in junior high schools, I unconsciously followed the values of straight boys around me. Even though I was considered ‘sissy boy,’ I still looked down on other sissy boys. I don’t know if that was self-loathing or something else.

This confession shows not only an awareness of internalized bottom-shaming but also how masculinist norms shape self-perception and community gatekeeping.

Similarly, Ben, who self-identified as a “1,” described the tension of being perceived as less masculine due to his soft-spoken demeanor and gentle personality. He playfully adopted the term 大母一 (Big Fem Top) to satirize the rigidity of gendered expectations:

你可以理解为是一种讽刺,因为我的声音不是阳刚的,然后我又是一个温柔的人,所以朋友们见到我时就自动代入我是一个‘零’。但实际上在生活中,我是一个‘一’。后来我就自称‘大母一’,你们满意了吧。

“You can see it as sarcasm. My voice isn’t masculine and I’m a gentle person, so my friends automatically assume I’m a bottom. But in reality, I’m a top. Then I tell them I’m a “Big Fem Top.” You satisfied now?”

By employing irony, Ben reclaimed agency through parody, exposing the absurdity of how sexual roles are policed by masculine norms.

In their interviews, both Sangsang and Ben reflected on how the emergence of “Side” provided a crucial space to resist this normative pressure. For Sangsang, adopting the “Side” label was a way to sidestep the effeminophobia inherent in the “0” category, relieving him from the burden of bottom-shaming by offering an identity constructed outside the system that upheld it. For Ben, “Side” functioned as a discursive shield, allowing him to opt out of a “1/0” dichotomy whose gendered expectations he could never fully meet. This form of resistance is not a frontal assault on the 1/0 system but a strategic circumvention of its power. By choosing “Side,” individuals like Sangsang and Ben engage in a quiet but potent refusal to play by rules that systematically devalue the feminine, whether in others or in themselves. This sentiment was echoed by six more participants, who described in various ways how the “Side” label offered relief from the gendered policing of the 1/0 system, whether by escaping bottom-shaming or freedom from the pressure to perform hegemonic masculinity as a “1.”

“Side” As a Parallel System of Self-Identification

A recurrent pattern across participants’ narratives is that, prior to the visibility of “Side,” many struggled to locate themselves within the rigid categories of the 1/0 system. Those who neither fit comfortably as “1” nor “0” often described a sense of identity dislocation or illegitimacy. The frequent recourse to ambiguous labels such as “0.5,” “0.8,” or desexualized terms like “asexual” or “platonic” represented attempts to bridge a semantic gap in the community’s self-descriptive vocabulary.

Reflecting on this, Tutu recalled:

我知道这个词之前,我可能更多的是以‘0’的身份去跟人相处,但说实话,我不觉得自己是‘0’。我进行1/0那种行为的次数一只手都数得过来。

Before I knew the word ‘Side,’ I probably interacted with people more as a ‘0,’ but honestly, I don’t think I am a ‘0.’ I can count on one hand the times I actually engaged in 1/0 sex.

Chai similarly recounted using fractional labels to approximate his experience:

在 Side 出现之前,我没有太明确的标签,但当别人一定要我选,我会说我是0.5偏零,或者0.4、0.3的样子。

Before ‘Side’ emerged, I never had a clear label. If I had to choose, I’d say I was 0.5 leaning 0—or maybe 0.4, 0.3.

Such fractional identities underscore the inadequacy of the 1/0 framework to account for sexual diversity. When “Side” entered common usage, several participants described a sense of relief and validation. As Chai put it:

就是我看到了它 (Side),我知道了它,然后我觉得那我好像是它,我很难说是我选择了它,还是它选择了我。但是就是我看到那个标签,我觉得,我觉得好像我这么多年来迷茫的说我到底是0还是1的那个概念好像被解决了。

When I saw it (Side), and knew about it, I feel like I might just be it. It’s hard for me to say if I chose the label or the label had chosen me. But when I saw it, I felt, I felt that all those years of confusion, wondering whether I was a 0 or a 1, were finally resolved.

For these participants, “Side” became more than a label of sexual acts; it emerged as a parallel system of self-identification, giving legitimacy to experiences that the 1/0 taxonomy had rendered invisible. For many, adopting “Side” was both a linguistic and psychological act of self-authorization, enabling them to exist intelligibly within community discourse without being misclassified or stigmatized.

“Side” As a Strategic Tool Navigating the Digital Match-Making Game

Even as participants resisted or reframe the 1/0 system, they continued to operate within its algorithmic and social infrastructures. Dating platforms like *Blued* and *Fanka* still codify sexual roles as searchable filters, reproducing the match-making logic that privileges binary complementarity. Within this digitalized terrain, participants often mobilize “Side” tactically to enhance visibility, increase matchability, or manage expectations, resonating with what Wang (2020) called “data gaming.”

For some, “Side” strategically bypasses the perceived incompatibility of same-role partners, thereby expanding relational possibilities. As CC explained:

以前在小蓝上交友, 认为两个零不可能在一起, 现在如果都用 Side 的话, 那也不是不可以。

Before, in the social practice on Blued, two bottoms were considered impossible together, but now, if they both use Sides, it does not seem impossible.

For others, “Side” was a flexible label used to navigate attraction and compatibility. Sames noted its use as a bridge to a desired partner:

如果那个人我很喜欢, 然后他只接受 Side, 我可以说我也是 Side, 这样我可能更靠近他。

If I really like someone and he only accepts Sides, I can say I’m a Side too—so I can get closer to him.

Meanwhile, Jack found that the label functioned as a more efficient profile tag, increasing his opportunities for sex opportunities:

我觉得这个词出现之后, 我不会再说自己是 0 或是 0.5, 我会说自己是 Side。我获得性资源的容易度更高了一些。

Since this term appeared, I wouldn’t call myself 0 or 0.5 anymore; I would say I am a side. It’s become easier for me to access more sexual resources.

Finally, Jiahao’s account revealed a more nuanced, temporal strategy. He used “Side” not to refuse penetrative sex permanently, but to control the pace and expectations of an encounter:

我不确定想不想和他发生性关系的话, 我会说自己是 Side, 就是管理对方心理预期。就是说就算今晚线下见面也不会大于一场, 但这不表示以后没有可能 1/0。

When I am not sure if I want to have sex with that person, I would say I am a ‘Side’ to manage his expectations. It’s like telling him even if we meet offline tonight, we wouldn’t have a full-on sex, but it does not exclude the future possibilities of 1/0.

This tactical use of “Side” functions as a provisional and communicative tool, allowing him to create a low-pressure, non-penetrative framework for a first meeting, preserving the possibility of future 1/0 sex while explicitly removing its immediate expectation. This shows how the term is used to negotiate not just who one connects with, but how and when intimacy unfolds.

These accounts altogether reflect a pragmatic layer of digital agency, where “Side” functions both as a mode of self-identification and as a flexible strategy for negotiating matchability, desirability, and relational access. This tactical navigation of the 1/0 system – using “Side” to resist categorization, manage expectations, and enhance matchability – resonates with the concept of transpositioning proposed by Li and Lee (2024). They defined transpositioning as the capacity to perform multiple roles simultaneously and spontaneously through dynamic communicative practices. Our findings reveal that Chinese gay men are not just spontaneously shifting roles but are doing so with clear pragmatic intent. We therefore refine this concept to strategic transpositioning, highlighting how their moves are deliberate tactics for navigating the specific pressures of a hierarchical, datafied sexual marketplace.

In summary, “Side” functions simultaneously as resistance, identification, and play: it resists normative power of effemiphobia, provides a parallel vocabulary for self-definition,

and strategically mobilizes ambiguity to navigate the game-like logic of algorithmic match-making. Together, these layers reveal how Chinese gay men, not merely as users but as semiotic agents, actively rework the linguistic and cultural infrastructures of intimacy to pursue well-being, recognition, and connection within the bounds of a datafied sexual culture.

Discussion

Previous studies on sexual roles in Chinese gay culture (e.g., Zheng et al., 2017; Zhou, 2023) have highlighted how the 1/0 system operates as a gendered hierarchy, naturalizing penetrative roles and reproducing unequal power relations. Meanwhile, Western scholarship on “Side” has largely focused on how homosexuality legitimizes penetrative acts while marginalizing non-penetrative sex and those who prefer it (Bollas, 2021, 2024). Our study builds upon but moves beyond these structural perspectives by examining the lived experiences of Chinese gay men who identify or practice as “Side.” Although our participants shared the sense of marginalization reported elsewhere, confirming that the 1/0 system does shape desirability and legitimacy, their accounts also reveal sexual agency: the capacity to negotiate, reinterpret, and tactically navigate the system that constrains them. Our findings also showcase that “Side” operates simultaneously as an authentic identity and an instrumental tactic, a duality that reflects the reality of navigating a datafied sexual marketplace where labels must serve both self-definition and social negotiation. Through this lens, “Side” emerges not merely as a position outside penetration or a label independent from the 1/0 system, but as a praxis of sexual agency manifested in two interwoven dimensions. First, it functions as a practice of well-being, consciously reconfiguring intimacy around care, comfort, and connection rather than performance. Second, it embodies a queering potential, actively reworking the relations between sexual acts, identity, and desire, thereby unsettling the binaries and hierarchies naturalized within the 1/0 system.

“Side” As a Praxis of Well-Being: Shifting from Performance to Care

Participants’ narratives consistently show that adopting “Side” stems from a conscious pursuit of overall well-being, standing in sharp contrast to the stressful and performance-driven sexual model dictated by the 1/0 system. This pursuit manifests across physical, psychological, and relational dimensions, marking a profound shift in the ethics of intimacy, one that aligns with emerging scholarly calls to center the well-being of Chinese gay men beyond health risk frameworks (Gong & Miao, 2025).

“Side” advocates for a well-being-centered model of sex, characterized first by prioritizing bodily autonomy and comfort. Participants’ rationales for practicing it – mitigating health risks, avoiding physical pain, and embracing practical ease – reflect a pragmatic and agentic engagement with their own bodies. This stands in direct opposition to homosexual norms that uphold penetration as the only “authentic” or “legitimate” form of gay sex. For individuals who experienced penetrative sex as unpleasurable or unwelcome, the rigid 1/0

framework often fostered a sense of alienation. “Side” provides them a vocabulary of refusal and reclamation – not as a failure, but as a positive choice for a different kind of pleasure grounded in bodily awareness and self-care.

Furthermore, this model directly addresses psychological well-being by offering liberation from the performance anxiety inherent in the 1/0 hierarchy. The immense pressure described by Jiahao to “stay firm” as a “1” exemplifies the mental strain of upholding hegemonic masculinity. The relief expressed by him and other participants upon identifying as “Side” underscores the mental health burden imposed by this coercive script. By creating a space where intimate connection and emotional reciprocity can take precedence over penetrative expectations, “Side” enables a form of psychological safety often absent in sexual acts governed by conventional 1/0 expectations. This alternative framework redirects the focus of sexual and relational fulfillment from compliance with rigid scripts of penetrative competence and gendered performance toward the experience of psychological safety and shared presence.

Lastly, this focus on well-being reconfigures intimacy from a goal-oriented act to a relational process. The distinction participants made between the transactional nature of some 1/0 encounters and the sustained sociality possible after a “Side” encounter is telling. It suggests that “Side” facilitates intimacy measured by the quality of connection and the assurance of mutual care. In this sense, “Side” is not merely an absence of penetration, but the presence of an alternative ethos where well-being, encompassing safety, comfort, and emotional security, becomes the primary metric of a successful sexual and relational life.

The “Queering” Potential of “Side”: Uncoupling Acts, Identities, and Labels

Beyond its implications for individual well-being, the phenomenon of “Side” carries a distinct “queering” potential that unsettles the normative foundations of the Chinese gay semiotic match-making system. Queer theory, at its core, seeks to destabilize fixed categories and reveal their constructed nature (Butler, 2006; Sedgwick, 2024). The way “Side” is understood and deployed by Chinese gay men performs precisely this destabilizing work.

First, it uncouples sexual identity from specific sexual acts. The 1/0 system tightly binds a man’s social and sexual identity to a specific penetrative role. “Side” severs this link, asserting that a legitimate gay identity can be built around a diverse repertoire of non-penetrative practices. This challenges the pervasive notion that acts like kissing or mutual masturbation are merely “foreplay” subordinate to the “main event” of anal sex, reframing them instead as complete and satisfying sexual experiences in their own right. This uncoupling is a fundamental queer intervention, revealing the naturalized connection between act and identity as constructed and contingent.

Second, it exposes the fluidity and strategic negotiability of labels themselves. Our analysis reveals that “Side” is not a fixed, essential identity for many of its users. Instead, it is a dynamic and tactical resource. Participants’ use of the label – as a bridge to a desired partner, a tool to manage expectations,

or a parodic device to expose systemic absurdity – illustrates a sophisticated form of sexual agency within a datafied match-making culture. This strategic deployment shows that labels are not passive descriptors but active tools for navigation. The “queering” here lies in this conscious performance and manipulation of categories, revealing them as provisional and context-dependent rather than natural or immutable.

Finally, the very vagueness of “Side” is its strength. Unlike the precise, binary logic of 1/0, “Side” remains an open signifier. It can encompass gentle intimacy for one person and include kink for another; it can be a permanent identity for some and a temporary state for others. This ambiguity creates a productive space that refuses to be pinned down, inviting a continuous process of negotiation and personal definition. It challenges the community’s deep-seated adherence to heteronormative gender roles by creating a category where masculinity is not the primary currency and where relationships like “two sides” become not only possible but logical.

In conclusion, while we do not claim that “Side” alone will dismantle the entrenched hierarchies of the Chinese gay community, its emergence marks a critical cultural moment. It represents a growing collective assertion that sexual value lies in personal well-being and mutual connection rather than conformity to a penetrative and gendered script. By offering a legitimate space outside the 1/0 binary, “Side” invites all of us, community members and scholars alike, to rethink the rules of the match-making game and to imagine more inclusive, flexible, and life-affirming possibilities for sexual culture and intimacy.

Conclusion

This study has traced the journey of “Side” from a globalized digital import to a meaningfully negotiated category within the Chinese gay semiotic landscape. Based on the lived experiences of our participants, we have argued that its significance lies not in creating a new, rigid box, but in offering a critical lens through which to question the existing ones. “Side” emerges as a multifaceted response to the pressures of the dominant 1/0 system: it is a practice of well-being that centers bodily comfort and psychological safety, a form of resistance to effeminophobia and performative masculinity, and a queer semiotic strategy that introduces fluidity and ambiguity into a rigidly structured match-making game.

The rise of “Side” suggests an emergent and significant cultural development in Chinese gay male culture – a growing collective assertion that the value of intimacy lies not in conforming to a penetrative and gendered script, but in the pursuit of mutual pleasure, security, and connection. It represents a demand for a more expansive and life-affirming sexual culture, one that makes space for a wider spectrum of desires and practices. While the 1/0 system, reinforced by digital infrastructures and deep-seated cultural norms, remains powerfully entrenched, the discursive negotiation of “Side,” as documented in the first-hand accounts gathered here, demonstrates the community’s capacity for reflexive critique and adaptation. It opens up a crucial conversation, inviting a reimagining of the rules of intimacy where well-being, not just binary compatibility, is the ultimate goal.

The study was not without limitations. Our sample consisted of 15 participants who were predominantly young, urban, and highly educated. This demographic profile, while offering rich insights into the experiences of a particular segment of the Chinese gay community, limits the transferability of our findings. The meanings and negotiations of “Side” may be significantly different for older gay men, those living in rural or less urbanized areas, or individuals from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Additionally, as an emerging identity category, “Side” may currently occupy a predominantly affirmative space for early adopters. However, ambivalence or concerns about hierarchy may emerge more strongly as the label becomes more mainstream over time.

The findings point to several future research directions. First, future research could draw on the findings presented here by exploring the long-term trajectory of “Side” across more diverse samples. Second, building on our observation that participants navigated “Side” as both an authentic identity and a strategic tool, future research could investigate how users navigate the tension between authentic self-expression and strategic self-presentation in datafied dating contexts, and under what conditions a label like “Side” consolidates into a stable identity category versus remaining a provisional tactical resource. Finally, moving beyond the Chinese context, comparative studies could examine how the emergence of “Side” in different cultural settings challenges or reconfigures entrenched notions of sexual positioning and power, contributing to a broader understanding of how globalized digital cultures interact with local sexual hierarchies.

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