Performativity, Intertextuality, and Social Change:

An Ethnographic Analysis of Taiwanese Gay Personal Ads

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Abstract

Based on in-depth conversations with those who have actively been involved in the process of producing and responding to gay personal ads, this paper attempts to challenge the earlier content-centered and socio-psychological analyses concerning gay personals. In addition to analyzing elicited historical testimonials (the personal ads published in print), I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-two Taiwanese gay men who actively posted and/or responded to gay personal ads. In my interviews it soon became evident that the notion of intertexuality and multiple levels of linguistic functions worked together to facilitate the linguistic performance in gay communication, but that the respective importance of these was changed by the transition from print to digital media.

Introduction[1]

1   Prior to the rise of the Internet as the chief vehicle for personal ad placements, a group of linguistic codes identifiable as referring to Taiwanese gay (or sexually non-conforming) men were used to correspond in mainstream Taiwanese magazines. These "situated" linguistic systems, which can also be described as a cultural *taste*, "an acquired disposition" to "make difference by a process of distinction" (Bourdieu 466), have enabled Taiwanese gay men both to pass in relation to mainstream readers and helped construct homosexual identities. Based on in-depth conversations with those who have actively been involved in the process of producing and responding to gay personals, this paper attempts to challenge the earlier content-centered and socio-psychological analyses concerning gay personals. In addition to analyzing elicited historical testimonials (the personal ads published in print), I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-two Taiwanese gay men who actively posted and/or responded to gay personal ads. In my interviews it soon became evident that the notion of intertexuality and multiple levels of linguistic functions worked together to facilitate the linguistic performance in gay communication, but that the respective importance of these was changed by the transition from print to digital media.

Historical Review of Content-based Approaches

2   In the context of western academic research, personal ads have long been examined in the area of social psychology, and are recognized as a valuable source of information about self-presentation, social roles, gender stereotypes, and judgments of attractiveness (see Jones). Many studies have employed quantitative methodology to compare heterosexual and homosexual samples, concluding that gay men emphasize physical characteristics and mention sexuality more often than do women and heterosexual men (see Deaux & Hanna; Koestner & Wheeler; Gonzales & Meyers; Child, et al.). Furthermore, heterosexual men sought long-term relationships and mentioned sincerity more often than did gay men (see Gonzales & Meyers). Much of this content-based research compared social and psychological demands overtly stated in personal ads; in an attempt to unravel the gender differences, personal ads placed by both hetero- and homosexual males were repeatedly construed as a testimonial arena and (ab)used for comparisons concerning deviances, differences and sexualities.

3   This socio-psychological approach to gay personals has its limits. In order to devise a quantitative comparison, the coding schemes in most of the aforementioned research relied on straightforward declarations of what one has and what one wants (e.g. Deaux & Hanna 363), "ignoring the importance of textual constraints, discursive practice and socio-cultural relations of power restructured in the text" (Jones 37). Accordingly, this paper argues that the difference between male heterosexuals and homosexuals is more reflective of the socially constructed marginality in which male homosexuals have little opportunity for legitimate and public same-sex relationships, rather than proof of their supposedly genetically-determined promiscuous nature. It is sometimes more plausibly assumed that personal ads in Asia, e.g. in India and Taiwan, are more linguistically indirect and grammatically complicated; as suggested by intercultural studies, in high-context cultures communication relies more heavily on the context rather than the words articulated (see Hall).

Taiwanese Gay Personals: A Socio-linguistic Inquiry

4   The capability of detecting their alliances and partners efficiently and accurately is imperative for sexual minorities. These "performances" are emblematic of a situated cultural production and legitimation of social distinction, enabling gay men to "pick each other out in a crowd" (Shelp 2). Without any gay-themed magazines before 1993, the gay personals lurking beneath the mainstream Taiwanese magazines were nearly unknown to outsiders. While GWM has long been known to mean "Gay White Male" in an Anglo-American

context, most gay linguistic registers in Chinese only emerged in the early 1990s. Although the informal and private discussions of gay sensibility or *taste* took place in a limited circle far earlier, it was not until 1993, when the first Taiwanese lesbian magazine, *Ai-Bao[2]*<fn, had its debut, that some gay identifications became more readily recognizable in the public sphere due to repeated use. In the meantime, a myriad of articles have invented new lexicons in an attempt to replace the conventionally stigmatizing usages in *Ai-Bao* and *G & L* (another leading gay-themed magazine). However, due to a lack of grass-roots activism, these articles provided antidotal, western-imported usages to redefine and reframe male homosexual relationships in Taiwanese society. For instance, "top" and "bottom" were quickly imported and are widely used. "No C, no fat" has become one of the most commonly used sentences. Currently known as the abbreviation for sissy, "C" has nearly replaced any traditional Chinese expression of being feminine. Some localized usages evolved rapidly after the Internet became the chief vehicle of relationship matching. In the Taiwanese context, familial obligations are referred to the constellation of homosexual relationships to some degree: masculine and senior characters then identifying themselves as "Ge-Ge" (literally "senior brother"); feminine, senior and caretaking roles are "Je-Je" (literally "elder sister"). Along the same line, younger and sexually undifferentiated versatile gay men are "younger brothers," whereas the younger and feminine gay men are known as "Mei-Mei." The elderly and gay are often mocked as "auntie" or "grandma."

5   In 2006, I joined a workshop related to Taiwanese gay men health concerns and empowerment. After the workshop, a participant brought up the "funny personal ads" in the early 90s. I was surprised about the drastic social changes that the new technologies have brought about over the last decades. I have been connected with a number of informants, which later inspired me to conduct a study. Accordingly, I started searching the magazines systematically, reading between the lines and looking into issues carefully in an attempt to understand how several magazines were chosen as a site of desire where Taiwanese gay men appropriated texts and intertexts to assert their homosexual subjectivities. As mentioned earlier, this research was in reaction to several active informants, thus ethnographic interviews were conducted to retrieve their situated experience of producing and consuming these texts.

6   It is in this context that my research was conducted, and a snowballing sample scheme was employed to expand my sample from the close friends and acquaintances of researchers to the people in the circle. Since all my informants were mostly well educated, working

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[2] *Ai-Bao* means "Love Newspaper," while *G & L* is an abbreviation of gay and lesbian.

professionals (volunteers for AIDS pandemic prevention and education), I do not pretend that they represent the average Taiwanese gay male. Instead, this study intends to analyze situated and strongly context-bound social linguistic practices to shed light on the notions of intertexuality and performativity discussed in cultural studies. Communication among the members of this small community was covert, not known to the public, and thus these gay personals manifest the notion of intertextuality by importing, recreating or referencing internal or foreign texts to create a pool of meanings that can be decoded by certain readers only. At a time when the common linguistic registers and presentations had not yet come into existence, this site became a place where a wide range of "performance exercises" were executed. Some succeeded; others failed. Thus, the examination of the dynamic process of creation illuminates how social reality is continually created through social signs (cf. Butler's concept of performativity). In the same vein, this study sets out to displace content as the natural site, inverting the claims of traditional hermeneutics for meanings as substantive, expressive, and essential.

Gay Personals Lurking Beneath the Surface

Kaoshiung, 174, 24, easygoing, into photography, mountain climbing and outdoor activities; I would like to make friends with you (guys) who are optimistic and forward looking. (Chih-Shiung[3], 24)

> Taichung, 169, 22, music lover wants to make friends with guys, will reply to any responses enclosed with photos and phone number. (Yu-Lin Chang, 22)

7   Starting in the 1980s, five to ten personal advertisements like the ones above began to appear quietly in each issue of *Green and Red Light of Love*, a magazine akin to *Cosmopolitan* in the US, which had long been advising working-class, high-school educated young Taiwanese twenty-somethings on dating and relationships. At first glance, these ads often passed as regular personals as a result of not being read as addressing a person of the same sex[4]. In the 1980s, these personal ads resembled other (non-gay) personals; the only identifiable information disclosed, although ambiguously, was that the search was geared towards same-sex (male) friends. Due to length restrictions, the authors of personal ads often

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[3] In this paper, all Chinese names of my informants are pseudonyms. The paper keeps English names as given by informants. The use of English names in the Taiwanese context has a high degree of anonymity since these names are not official. Most personal advertisement posters use English names so as not to reveal their real identity. It is common for Taiwanese to have ten English names for different occasions.

[4] The English pronoun *you* does not differentiate male or female. However, such a distinction is made in Chinese. In other words, the personal ad loses its specifically male addressee when translated into English.

refrained from intimating their intentions. Given this, every poster followed a standardized linguistic genre. Often gay posters indicated that they were looking for a "soul mate" to spend their leisure time with. Their "linguistic struggle" consists in finding a "proper" performance, i.e. one revealing a non-conforming male self but not being too obviously "different." At times, the only identifiable register that differentiates gay personals from non-gay ads was a target specified as "male." The prospective respondents were required to read closely to differentiate a "male denoting you" from a "female denoting you" (see note 3). Most ads are kept low profile, following a generic pattern; almost everyone has similar talents and hobbies. While the boundary is neither absolute nor certain, gay male affiliated hobbies likely include: movies, hiking, traveling and photography. As stated by a number of informants consistently: "Straight guys do not usually make so much effort to meet guys on personals." Second, "guys do not have to care how well their respondents look." An informant expresses the possibility for queer decoding as follows:

> ...you know, what type of guy would post an ad to look for another guy to go hiking and traveling together? Yes, straight men may love to do that with their buddies, but they won't post their search in a women's magazine. (Jake , 37, who posted his ads and allegedly received 88 responses)

Kai-Wei, 42, who responded to three ads in the 1980s, commented on the creation of these personal advertisements: whatever they write, only one word counts, which is the male-denoting "you." This key word is to be found in such a sentence as "I would like to make friends with 'you.'"

8   Despite the linguistic distinction, readers are likely to misunderstand the poster's intention. For one thing, the male-denoting "you" is somewhat inclusive and used to refer to male or female. In terms of linguistic evolution, the female-denoting "you" came into existence under the influence of Roman languages which differentiate the feminine and masculine more strictly. The correspondent female-denoting pronoun in Chinese was thus created to more accurately translate western imported ideas. Because of this grammatical ambiguity the possibility remains that the ad creator literally wants to find buddies to play basketball together.

Gay Personals among Cinephiles

9   Gay men have long used cinema as an important arena for the enacting of homosexual meanings (see Farmer). Movie theaters have long functioned as an "in venue" for gay men's cruising, and this has also been the case in Taiwan. However, not until 1993, when the *Golden*

Horse film festival featured a gay-themed section[5], have large-scale gay-themed films been accessible and well-received in a legitimate context. Given that gay-themed movies were usually rated as "restricted" and had to be scheduled late in the evening, going to the movies, combined with the likelihood of dating and cruising, mobilized a large number of dispersed gay cinephiles to attend the screenings. Taking advantage of the popularity of film festivals and the visible association between gay males and cinema, a handful of Taiwanese movie-related magazines lent themselves as outlet for gay readerships. Featuring special issues focusing on identity politics, desires and fantasy, these magazines transformed into a key vehicle for gay male personals. As the number of gay personals grew exponentially, the genres and linguistic registers they employed were becoming diversified. While many remained conventional - customarily sincere and polite - akin to their straight counterparts, different articulations emerged among gay-identifying posters with certain positions and references that disclosed and, sometimes, even covertly affirmed their sense of gay subjectivity. Here are some examples of film-derived ads:

> I wish to see the first *green ray* of light in the early summer morning. (Yang, 26, friendship)

> Stifled ...... a yearning for the room with a view. (Yan, 33)

> Walking amid a sun-drenched desert, disoriented, this is my so-called "*private Idaho*." I can't take it any longer. (Moosh, 38)

Green Ray, the film referenced in the first post, was a well-received among gay circles. The heroine's long pursuit of "true love" was resonated with the community's collective memories of growing up gay in Taiwan. Trying to relate their experiences with others, Taiwanese gay men reference cinematic texts, especially those of Rohmer's films.[6]

10   In January 1997, Corey posted the following personal advertisement in *World Movie Monthly*, a leading Taiwanese film magazine:

> I would like to grow up bravely just as a shrub aspires to survive the most difficult winter and thrive. (Corey[7], 34, male, friendship)

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[5] Gay-themed movies showing at the in 1991 Taipei Golden Horse film festival included: *Garden* (GB 1990); *Torch Song Trilogy* (US 1988); *Total Eclipse* (US 1990).

[6] Eric Rohmer is an acclaimed French filmmaker and a frontier in the French New Wave. His film was screened in the *Golden Horse* film festival. Several informants of the study felt that the female narrators in his movie in fact are gay men in drag.

[7] As a longstanding friend of the author, Corey (pseudonym) volunteered to offer many personals he posted and share with me what he thought of the responses he received.

There were a hundred and fifty personals published in the issue: approximately 35% of them were similar to Corey's. Within two months Corey received twenty responses: eight were from women; twelve were from men. Corey maintained correspondences with three men regularly. After six months, Corey started dating one of the three, and they have been together for nine years. Corey's story exemplifies a situated linguistic practice in which he re/produces gay male subjectivity. In his words, these linguistic registers "often entail contradictions and contrasts, strangely uncanny." For instance, similar textual practices such as "melancholy struggle," "icy warmhearted," "loneliness amid a crowd" and "subversively submissive" occurred in the same issue. These linguistic terms became emblematic of gayness, actively targeting Taiwanese homosexual men before the rise of the Internet.

Cross Media Intertextuality and Performativity

11   In a 1997 issue of *World Movie Monthly*, Tim posted the following personal:

> After a while, like a deer, we learnt to lick our wounds to ease the pain. After a while, we came to the realization that our darkest fears were remarkably average. After a while we bumped into each other in the shade of a tree. You smiled and sighed: Oh, you are here, too. (Tim, 29, friendship)

In answer to the above paragraph, Tim received more than 80 responses; approximately 70 respondents were male. By 1995, this staged performance, a tacit consensus among posters and respondents on the matter, unknown to non-community members, had become recognizable to the majority of gay men in Taiwan. In Tim's opinion, his personal ad disturbed earlier linguistic genres by deliberately omitting his offerings; it was thus too "obscure" for straight men. Fraught with ambiguity and dissonance, the stream of consciousness, tension, juxtaposition and struggling presented in personal ads, according to my informants, signified a gay sensibility.

12   In the interview, Tim continued to explain what constitutes "gay registers," or a gay archetype in Taiwan. The most popular icons surfacing in the gay scene he can think of are the "young-sad-boys" in *Crystal Boys*, a novel by Kenneth Pai published in Taiwan in 1983. Literally, "crystal boys" means "sons of sin," but it may also be an allusion to a state in which "friendless officials and concubine's sons"[8], the ostracized individuals in Chinese imperial society, had to learn to negotiate their identity. Ostracized by their schools and families, the

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[8] Qu Yuan relates the notion of friendless officials and concubine's sons in one of the earliest pieces of Chinese classic literature, *Li Sao* (*Sorrow of Parting*), to the ostracism experienced by male homosexuals in modern society.

protagonists of *Crystal Boys* are sentimental and depressed. The characters of *Crystal Boys* became convenient intertextual references. The shady trees, pagoda, red pavilion, lotus pool, skyline and moon reflected upon the small pond of the Taipei New Park[9] became signifiers often appropriated in stream–of-consciousness passages. Notably, the semantic construction depends heavily on hidden dialogicity, i.e. the omission of the statement of one speaker in a dialogue between two persons. The meanings of words stretched beyond common dictionary definitions to point to individual and contextual differences.[10] Thus, although gay personals were not primarily a political medium, they nevertheless became subversive texts challenging conventional linguistic and semantic usage and heteronormativity and turned into a crucial vehicle for the construction of Taiwanese gay subjectivity. In addition to *Crystal Boys*, most gay-related linguistic registers were derived from art or works of literature, e.g. *Notes from a Desolate Man*, the winner of the *China Times* Novel Prize in 1994. In the text of *Notes*, the narrator, dying of AIDS in the end, discloses his desire and longstanding indulgence in anonymous sex across the world. While the writing in Notes illustrates the volatile relation between signifiers and signifieds, the intertextual appropriation of texts in personal advertisements enabled the respondents, most likely also the readers of Notes, to interact, to respond and to exchange their shared texts. The slices of life narrated in Notes were cited and reproduced among gay men in Taiwan, in particular, the protagonist's confrontation with his ex-lover's risky lifestyle, radical political activism, and eventual death. In the mindset of one poster, the perpetual recombination of fragments from Notes was emblematic of "the fragility of romantic love; the awesome power of eroticism; the solace of writing and the cold ennui of a younger generation enthralled only by video games" (personal ad posted in 1995).

From Mainstream Magazine to Cyberspace: From Asexual to Hypersexual

13   "Taiwan's gay movement is also a movement of media" (Chou 159). Scholars analyzing Taiwan's gay movements claim that the rapid emergence and growth of Taiwanese gay/lesbian/queer community in the 1990s can be attributed to computer-mediated

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[9] Beginning in the early 1980s, the Taiwanese gay community became increasingly visible in urban settings, most notably the Taipei New Park depicted in Crystal Boys and other gay-themed works of fiction. Located in proximity to the presidential palace and parliament, the Taipei New Park was established as a public space, but the Chinese-styled architecture and the abundance of shade combined with the frequent intrusion from patrols and the enforcement of martial law made it a significant location laden with cultural connotations for sexual minorities in the 1980s.

[10] Thus, the line "Oh, you are here too," derived from the theme song of the film version of *Crystal Boys*, Taiwan's first gay-themed movie, and alludes to a reunion after a lengthy journey in which disbelief and mischief almost ruin homosexual relationships.

communication (see Berry & Martin; Yang; Chou). The rise of the Internet during the 1990s has helped form a virtual community where gay/lesbian/queer people increase their visibility in an anonymous fashion (see Chang). The earliest form of interactive Internet communication in Taiwan was the Chinese-text-based Internet Relay Chat (IRC). The most popular IRC site for gays in Taiwan was MOTSS (Members Of The Same Sex). As a "virtual community" MOTSS provides a "public sphere," common ground for the sharing and discussion of issues important to its participants. In light of the accessibility and interactivity of the Internet, most personal posters migrated to such communities where members can garner resources and support to aid them in the pursuit of their lives. MOTSS functions as an alternative medium, and represents both a community to its subscribers and a resource to the gay and lesbian community in Taiwan.

14   Local web pages were scarce until 1997 and were not as popular as MOTSS due to their relatively non-interactive nature. However, the text-based format applied by MOTSS and similar sites gradually lost its attraction when regular websites were able to create new platforms that offered higher degrees of interactivity. The number of sites targeting gay people increased drastically after 1997. The advanced infrastructure of information technology in Taiwan helped facilitate a rapid transition from the text-based IRC to gay virtual communities in which users could post audio/visual/textual messages and communicate simultaneously.

15   In the digital age, gay linguistic registers emerged rapidly by either borrowing from anglophone gay cultures, reinventing the existing language or by concocting it from scratch. For instance, in order to be fully literate in the gay community, non-English speaking gay Taiwanese became at least acquainted with the following words: *gay*, *lesbian*, *top*, *bottom*, *LTR*, *bears* or even *sugar daddy*. Additionally, vocabularies were introduced to facilitate the process of interpersonal communication among posters and respondents. For instance, "flaming," in contrast to "discreet," refers to a target who unabashedly demonstrates his male homosexual identity.

16   As the interfaces of cyberspace have become increasingly interactive, mostly taking place in the audio-visual form, the present gay personal advertisements have become polarized. Some sites exist mainly for people aiming to solicit sex, while others are more geared towards clients seeking relationships. According to Josh, who was a longstanding poster and has experienced the transition from print to digital media, "it is almost impossible to attract any respondent nowadays if you post an ad without featuring your photo." In contrast to the former gay "frontier" the gay personal ads in the mainstream media, such as

Top-Fong, have become quite sexually explicit. Since many gay-related sites have become oriented towards a clientele seeking to solicit brief sexual encounters, gay men looking for long-term relationships have distanced themselves from these sites by creating a different space and re/negotiating their position. Some gay Taiwanese men have returned to the mainstream friend-seeking arena, reframing their interests and deemphasizing their sexual orientation to find a sincere soul-mate relationship. They gained inspiration from the days when personal ads were created for mainstream magazines, sending ambiguously poetic statements seeking feedback from both male and female respondents. Through these strategies, they managed to successfully distinguish their endeavor from that of sex personals.

17   With the rise of the Internet, sources for personal advertisements became increasingly diverse and fragmented. No longer did any one magazine or newspaper monopolize the market of gay personals, and neither did the former spatial constraint apply. Despite being the most frequently-researched source for analysis, the personal advertisements featured in *Advocate*, the American GLBT bi-weekly magazine, are far from representative of gay-personal advertisements since the emergence of their online counterparts.

18   A growing fashion which has been covered by many columnists in gay-themed online sources is that gay men seeking mates insist explicitly that their potential partners should be genuine and true to themselves (see Elmer). Observing this phenomenon in hundreds of gay personals, Elmer concluded that an identifiable expression of the ad writers' virtuousness, discernment, and value" (no pag.) in the competitive dating pool has also become a strong selling point in the gay community of the digital age, such as:

> I want someone who is comfortable with who they are and who is stable sexually, mentally and emotionally. (Yahoo friend making site, 26 April 2005)

At the same time the use of abbreviation and jargons in personal advertisements is in sharp decline.

Conclusion

19   As seen from the transition of presentations of gay personals, my study maintains that gay personals display a wealth of cultural connotations and can serve as a particularly fertile terrain for the study of cultural construction and performance of sexuality. Studies of social change and homosexuality have given attention to how changes in institutions accommodate or disadvantage homosexual people (see Blasisus; Cohn & Gallagher; Jenness; MacNair et al.). The media are considered to be "the important forum for understanding cultural impact since they provide the major site in which contests over meaning must succeed politically"

(Gamson 59). For Gamson, media are the critical gallery for discourses carried on in other forums. In the given context, I argue that gay personal advertisements lurking beneath the mainstream media can be regarded as evidence for how the collective correspondences to the dominant ideology have manifested themselves by negotiating a sphere where the fear of outing and the yearning for visibility collide. The production of a personal ad is not casual; rather, it actively responds to culture, sponsors connotative meanings and is a site where cultural values and norms are contested.

20   This study aimed to offer a different perspective on the examination of personal ads, arguing that the earlier content-based approach, dependent upon straightforward declarations, was de-contextualized and ignored the power of institutional discourses and structures. This study illustrated how gay personal ads emerged as ongoing multiple processes of interactive performances: internally, with individual rehearsed life scripts loosely related to his/her biological body; externally, their performativity is policed by social norms, and, in the event of personal positing, linguistic capacity and anticipated institutional requirement. As Felluga suggests in reference to Judith Butler, "our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies" (no pag.), and the transitions of performance and intertextuality of gay personal ads illustrating these multiply interactive processes. In addition, this paper is written from a conviction that emphasis should be put on the psycholinguistic dimension of gay subjectivity, with a focus on performativity and intertextuality. Stressing the impossibility of "proving" sex, sexuality, and gender by recourse to a prior, foundational biological body, this paper illustrates the process of how the gay male homosexuality in Taiwan has been rehearsed, much like a script, and how we, as the actors make this script a reality over and over again by performing these actions (see Butler 1993, 1997, 1999).

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