

Attention Economy, Neoliberalism, and Homonormative Masculinity in Amateur Gay Porn Circuits on Twitter: The Case of Manila and Hong Kong

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Twitter is a popular digital space for circulating amateur gay porn and sexual narratives of gay men. These two-minute porn videos command thousands of views, and their anonymous owners boast thousands of followers. This paper investigates how attention economies work within a neoliberal framework in porn economies in Manila and Hong Kong. Using interviews and case studies, this paper argues that the conditions created by Twitter foster a particular kind of attention economy where users are expected to be creative and entrepreneurial in curating their profiles and presenting their pornographic content. This research argues that it is within these neoliberal spaces that gay men find the freedom to socialize, build communities, and inventively present themselves. The paper ends by offering insights into how we can think about the utility of pornography and sexualized self-presentation in queer sexual politics in the Asian context.

Keywords: attention economy, gay pornography, homonormative masculinity, Manila, Hong Kong

This paper examines how Twitter fosters an attention economy that espouses neoliberal rationality and is conducive to the reinforcement of homonormative masculinity. Neoliberalism refers to a broad concentration of economic and political ideas that emphasize freedom, unfettered competition, the free flow of goods, and intense individualism (Foster, 2016). Homonormative masculinity, on the other hand, “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). Analyzing the experiences of some

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queer male pornographers in Manila and Hong Kong who use Twitter vis-à-vis its dynamics, features, and affordances, this essay investigates how attention economy works within the framework of neoliberalism to further homonormative masculinity. Rather than simply considering how Twitter regulates human practices, this article argues that gay men exercise agency in negotiating their sexuality through pornography on a platform where attention not only signifies fame but also acceptance and erotic and masculine capital. Indeed, why do gay men produce pornography, and what do they get from it? Finally, this work offers insights into the function of pornography in queer sexual politics using the experiences of queer Asian men. Can we further develop the way we think about pornography beyond its use as a form of creative self-expression? Additionally, can we further the discussion of attention economy beyond the discourse of fame?

This study emerged from my doctoral dissertation (Cao, 2022a), which examined Filipino gay men's relationships with amateur pornography on Twitter. The fieldwork began in late 2019 as part of a paper for a doctoral course. I first became acquainted with the alter community in 2016 when I started using Grindr. Grindr allows users to place their Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram handles on their Grindr profile, so some Filipino gay men connect their alter community profiles to their Grindr accounts. I started my own alter account as a lurker. I watched videos, retweeted the posts and images that I liked for future reference, and chatted with some profiles that I found interesting. I did not make lasting friends in the alter community, perhaps because of my fleeting attachment to this collective. I only accessed this community whenever I had sexual urges, and I only chatted with the few online connections that I made there. Some of the "friends" that I had simply disappeared—their accounts were suspended, or they simply stopped logging in. We had no other way of contacting each other outside the alter community, as no one knew the other users' real names or other social media handles.

Accessing the field and conducting observations of how the alter community works is the easier part of the fieldwork. Talking to people is much harder because most pornographers are secretive and do not wish to speak about their experiences. Some were interested in being interviewed but did not wish to talk through video calls or chat outside Twitter. Furthermore, many pornographers that I knew did not log in regularly. Similar to my experience, they only appeared when they had sexual urges or were bored and needed people to talk with. I surmise that, because typing everything is tedious, some participants just got tired and stopped responding. Luckily, two famous Filipino pornographers, Gabriel and Benjie, were interested in chatting for an extended period. Three others were recruited through a call for participants on Facebook—Ronald, Benedict, and Jerry. Ronald and Jerry were referred to me by my close friends who were familiar with the alter community. Benedict, on the other hand, was a Facebook friend who admitted to doing pornography on Twitter. Our chats focused on their motivations for creating pornographic videos and tweets and their life experiences as queer men in the Philippines. I also gathered "found data" or content (mostly user-generated) that were publicly available for analysis on Twitter porn networks, including tweets, self-produced images and videos, and profile information. I examined the profiles of Ross and Raymond because of their consistent content creation and their long history of making porn videos. This was supplemented by the data I compiled from my newsfeed featuring Hong Kong-based Chinese pornographers.

In 2018, I went to Hong Kong to begin my doctoral education. I became increasingly reliant on apps like Grindr or Tinder to find sex partners, romantic relationships, and friends. I encountered difficulties, if not outright discrimination, in these dating apps because of my race and nationality. Many Grindr or Tinder

profiles in Hong Kong expressly indicate that they only prefer locals (i.e., Hong Kong-born Chinese) or East Asian men. With my few but close friends and romantic interests from these apps, I learned more about the Hong Kong Twitter network of gay pornographers. Although I could watch amateur porn videos from Hong Kong on Twitter, my friends Josh and Lam elaborated on the Twitter porn scene in Hong Kong.

In the Philippines, this community, or network of pornographers, is called the “alter community.” In the simplest terms, these gay porn communities are collectives of gay men who produce and/or consume amateur pornography through Twitter (Cao, 2021). These porn communities also represent gay men’s aspirations for sexual freedom. The word “alter” itself comes from the word “alternative,” which signifies an otherwise distinct reality that is only possible in the virtual world. This network of gay men whose relationships revolve around their shared sexuality and pornographic experiences may not be possible within the restrictive and homophobic realities of the offline world. As Grebowicz (2013) noted, the proliferation of pornography on the Internet signifies the democratization of technology and sexuality. For Grebowicz, one way to understand this democratization is the way the Internet facilitates easier access to pornographic media. However, Grebowicz (2013) also argued that online pornography facilitates “communities, networks of support, sharing and open discussion” (p. 48). With Filipino and Hong Kong-based amateur pornographers on Twitter, part of the democratizing aspect of online pornography is how it facilitates relationships and communities that “requires the disappearance of the secret existence” of these communities (Grebowicz, 2013, p. 58).

My participants share that they have no gay friends in the offline world. It is only in the virtual realm that they find queer male friends, sex partners, or romantic interests. In this context, democratization manifests through the ease of establishing (not necessarily maintaining) relationships based on sexuality. However, the word “alternative” may also refer to their other repressed gay self that can only be expressed within the bounds of a safe space, such as Twitter. Queer men express repressed sexual desires through tweets and pornographic videos. As much as “alternative” can refer to a utopian and queer future where queer individuals can gain genuine acceptance, the word can also mean “proxy.” For my participants, their Twitter profiles become their virtual selves and bodies, which are enabled and constrained by technological affordances.

In the Philippines, this community—the alter community—has a name, but there is no demonym for the members of this collective. In Hong Kong, there is no name for the community, but there is a term used to refer to the pornographers themselves. Josh, a Hong Kong Chinese gay man in his late 20s whom I met in 2020 through Grindr, told me that they call Twitter pornographers *mong wong* (網黃, literally “Internet yellow”) in Cantonese. Josh himself is not a gay pornographer but an avid follower of muscular gay Chinese pornographers. The color yellow in Chinese refers to acts and things that are indecent or “dirty,” including pornographic videos. Thus, *mong wong* refers to Internet users who produce indecent or pornographic texts. Josh further explains that *mong wong* is a derivation of *mong hung* (網紅, literally “Internet red”), which refers to Internet microcelebrities. To retain references to colors and their associated meanings in Chinese culture, people started using *mong wong*. Josh clarifies that no word refers to the community of the pornographers, nor does *mong wong* apply often to pornographers operating outside Twitter because most pornographers distribute their porn videos there.

These sexual publics hold more functions and symbolic meanings than just a platform to exchange pornography for gay pornographers and their followers. To my participants, like Gabriel and Lam, these publics allow them to find friends and share their struggles and joys in their everyday lives or simply discover “friends with benefits.” Twitter always suggests new profiles to follow, which some of my participants construe as new collaborators, new followers, or new friends. The recommendation algorithms for Twitter are opaque, but they seem to evaluate where most of the users one follows are located. There is seemingly an endless parade of potential friends, sex partners, boyfriends, porn collaborators, gym buddies, acquaintances, and Twitter followers. In other words, Twitter facilitates connections and social engagements that users can easily interpret as attention, something that my participants have a convoluted relationship with.

Gay Men and the Lack of Attention

In writing about the lack of attention that queer Asian men experience, I refer to how my participants consider their sexual identity (and, by extension, their individual selves) as always subservient to other social imperatives or norms. As I will show later, most of my participants lived repressing their sexual desires. In concealing their sexual identity, they and their families failed to pay due attention to their sexuality. This lack of attention manifests in negative feelings, such as disappointment or emotional pain, that queer men feel when repressing their sexuality. Queer men turn to digital spaces, such as Twitter, for attention from other queer men in the form of likes, retweets, chats, comments, or sexual contacts. Hong Kong and Manila have active networks of gay pornographers on Twitter, which allows us to examine how “ordinary” Asian men experience and express their sexuality in their everyday lives. Manila and Hong Kong have overlapping and diverging understandings of queer sexuality and the role the media plays in affording them a sense of sexual liberation. Both are very westernized cities, possessing long histories of colonization by Western powers and enduring relationships with them. As cosmopolitan, global, and postcolonial cities, Manila and Hong Kong offer insights into how gay men in these areas are torn between individual desires and social imperatives, and how the tension between them is mediated in digital media platforms.

In the Philippines, the introduction of Christianity and Western conceptions of gender and sexuality in the 16th century helped usher in homophobia. Pre-colonial Philippine society accepted transgender shamans and priestesses and permitted the conduct of sexual practices and intimate relationships that Christianity condemned as sin, such as same-sex sexual relations (Brewer, 1999, 2004; Garcia, 2009). Brewer (2004) contended that Spain, through Catholic friars, converted and indoctrinated the populace with patriarchal ideologies. Garcia (2004, 2009) notes that waves of colonization and the introduction of Christianity produced new sexual and gender orders that were inhospitable towards non-conforming individuals. Until today, queer men experience ostracism, discrimination, and at times, physical violence from their families, schools, workplace, or church. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, the criminalization of homosexual acts during British rule, the social and reproductive expectations placed on Chinese men, the lack of representations, and the vocabularies that defined queer sexuality and identities became the foundation for discrimination against queer men (Equal Opportunities Commission & The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016; Kong, 2019).

Mobile and online media provide opportunities for resistance. Through online groups or dating apps, LGBTQ communities in the Philippines and Hong Kong can seek solidarity, mobilize, and craft narratives that

oppose or disprove the impressions imposed by mainstream media and institutions (Labor & San Pascual, 2022; Soriano, 2014; Soriano & Cao, 2016; Tang, 2012). Solis (2020) argues that “it is easy to celebrate the contributions of gay technologies and social spaces to gay cruising, while they are also cautious of the accompanying disincentives” (p. 249). While scholars (e.g., Cao, 2021; Chan, 2021; Jones, 2020; Solis, 2020) recognize the opportunities for actively resisting patriarchy in digital spaces, they also caution that technologies are limited in challenging and overturning patriarchal systems.

Gay men’s daily lives are punctuated by feelings of pain, disappointment, guilt, or shame, resulting from the fear of being expelled from their families or discriminated against in their workplace. This is common among participants in both Hong Kong and Manila. As Gabriel tells me in one of our interviews:

I am the eldest son, so you see, I need to support my aging parents and siblings who are studying. If you’re the eldest, you’re expected to find work then help raise your siblings. That’s just natural. In 2016, I had to go to Dubai to support my family. I worked there and sent money to them. This was important because my three siblings were still studying, and my parents are already old, so I had to support my siblings as well. [...] But they cannot know about me liking men, or they’ll be disappointed. My parents will be heartbroken, and they may get angry with me. I also need to be discreet because my colleagues might get a whiff of it. If they get an idea that I like men, my colleagues may start avoiding me or say hurtful words to me. [...] If I lose my job, then how can I fulfill my duties to my family? (Gabriel, personal communication, 2019, as cited in Cao, 2022a, pp. 70–71).

I and my participants Jerry, Benedict, and Ronald share Gabriel’s fears. Ronald and I came out to our respective parents as gay men. In my case, I only told my parents about my sexuality once I went abroad to pursue my doctoral degree. My mother readily accepted me but struggled with adjusting her expectations. For example, there were times when she frequently sought reassurance that I would not get a gender-affirming surgery, as she was confusing gays with transgenders. Both the family and the workplace incited fear because of the constant threat of violence against me and other queer individuals to “correct” our sexuality. My colleagues in a gaming company where I worked said, “Gay men deserve to be beaten up,” or that our lesbian colleagues “need to be sexually violated to feel the ‘real’ sexual pleasure.” Jerry and Benedict shared the same fears about their workplaces, saying that their colleagues or bosses might ostracize them if they knew about their sexual and intimate lives. Ronald went through a similar experience, with his family instantly accepting his sexuality, but his extended family—his grandparents, aunts, and uncles—refusing to accept that he was doing pornography. Ronald says:

Luckily, I have very open-minded parents who supported me and defended my actions. They said I am free to express myself the way I want, and they will still accept me. [...] In the end, my grandparents just fell short of disowning us, and my parents and my aunts and uncles are at war. Just because I went nude on Twitter. Personally, I think it is good riddance. I don’t need homophobic relatives. But I also hate what happened [...] that my parents and their siblings and parents had a falling out. (Ronald, personal communication, 2020, as cited in Cao, 2022a, pp. 70–71)

Like my Filipino informants, Lam and Josh feel restricted by the expectations imposed on them by society and their families. Lam told me:

My parents have lots of expectations. They want me to find a nice job that pays high after my graduation. They don't know that I am gay. They ask me many times when I will tell them about a girl that I like. And they also expect me to buy a house once I have my own family. (Lam, personal communication, 2021)

I asked, "How do you feel about all these? I mean, getting a house is really hard in Hong Kong. They're so expensive." Lam replied, "I just ignore them, that's all. I don't think I can get a house at all in this place (Hong Kong), at least not within the next five or six years." Meanwhile, Josh told me that while he had already come out to his parents, they still thought that he was simply going through a "phase" and that he would eventually "get over it." However, when asked why he does not argue with his parents over his sexuality, Josh shared:

I do discuss my sexual orientation with my parents. My mom requested to keep this quiet. She always tells me that her friends and neighbors might know and that will be a humiliating experience for her. All of us will be targets of gossip around the housing estate. (Josh, personal communication, 2021)

The literature can enlighten us on why Filipino and Hong Kong gay men feel fear and emotional pain about their sexuality. One way of understanding this fear is how gay men are indoctrinated to understand gayness by "discover[ing] any deficiencies or difference in the sexual anatomy... that might explain why a male would voluntarily reject his masculinity" (Brewer, 1999, para. 18). Here, gay men's inability to be attracted to women and exercise their reproductive and sexual functions can be seen as an anatomical deficiency preventing them from fulfilling the societal roles expected of them, such as continuing their family's lineage. From a pathological view or a perspective of sexuality centered on deficiencies, punitive or therapeutic actions (e.g., physically beating up or sexually assaulting queer individuals or sending them to conversion therapists) can "correct" their sexual deficiencies. The failure of gay men to father children, express virility, or establish a family usually affects their relationships with the family and society. In Asian cultures, tradition and society are deemed more important than individual desires, and maintaining a good relationship with one's family and parents ensures that one can continue participating in different social and economic activities (Ren, Howe, & Zhang, 2019; Rodell, 2002). Considered the foundation of society, family is instrumental in ensuring one's social prestige, wealth, and opportunities for social mobility (Rodell, 2002). Whether it is about fulfilling financial duties to one's family or observing filial piety and following the parents' dreams for their children, choosing between individual desires and fulfilling social or familial imperatives brings emotional pain to gay men. To my participants, coming out means bringing disgrace to their families and may result in them being disowned or having to choose between their families and themselves. Without any other recourse in their everyday lives to seek belongingness, gay men turn to social media to seek attention.

Attention Economy in Social Media

Twitter's features, design, and algorithm foster a distinct form of attention economy. According to Bueno (2017), attention economy transforms attention or the gaze into "a source of data which allows

constructing a new object of power" (p. 106). Bueno claims that the attention economy entails specific forms of labor grounded in the changing nature of the relationship between value and labor in post-industrial societies. He further argues that, ultimately, the attention economy reproduces capitalist power and social relations, as attention becomes a form of raw data extracted from the audience for corporations to study, manipulate, and revert into the generation of wealth. Attention and its datafication and metrification are important in how knowledge and information are processed and presented on online platforms. Zulli (2017) argued that social media platforms are designed to orient users to adopt specific ways of looking at and producing content. Using the concept of "glancing," or a fleeting way of looking, Zulli proposes that media environments instruct us to adopt particular ways of looking that exploit our desires and reorient our behaviors. In her examination of Instagram, she argues that the platform allows us to cultivate a more intimate and intense relationship with images. The guaranteed stream of new content to add to the already endless catalog of photos and videos, however, conditions users to keep scrolling to consume more images that they might like.

Zulli (2017) suggests that in attention economies, users adopt specific behaviors that are influenced by platform features and affordances. For example, users use Instagram's built-in photo filters and editing features to enhance their photos and make them look more artistic, allowing users to carefully construct and curate virtual personas. To effectively harness attention and put themselves within a network of like-minded users, social media users establish specific self-branding strategies that guide the content they produce on the platform (Marwick, 2015). These influences are brought about by the metrification or quantification of social engagement, reach, and influence on social media platforms. According to Gerlitz and Helmond (2013), the buttons, features, and numbers found on social media platforms shape the kinds of interactions we have. This, in turn, affects how we present ourselves on social media. These metrics have become markers of our interaction and attention, a materialization of affect and engagement that are scalable and expandable.

Some of the studies on attention economy on Twitter and other social media platforms revolve around the idea of "microcelebrity." Unlike traditional celebrities whose public images result from carefully orchestrated public relations campaigns to achieve popularity, microcelebrities are mostly social media users popular among niche groups (Marwick, 2015, 2017). However, like traditional celebrities, microcelebrities work to increase or maintain their followers or fans (Marwick, 2017). They have limited engagement with their fans, but the way microcelebrities address their audiences gives an illusion of accessibility, while fans readily supply comments, likes, shares, or subscriptions that support the creative (sometimes financial) endeavors of the microcelebrities (Marwick, 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Wang & Ding, 2022). Senft (2008, 2013) views microcelebrities as individuals who are skilled in strategizing how they package themselves and interact with fans using a variety of media forms. Microcelebrities usually engage in self-branding exercises or in establishing themselves as unique personas (or commodities) within an environment (super)saturated with information and content.

In attention economies, individuals compete for attention by establishing personal brands. Competition for attention emerges because there is an abundance of content and content creators on the Internet vying for the limited attention of their viewers and followers (Smith & Fischer, 2021). Thus, there is a necessity to "stand out" from the crowd, and this can be achieved by using or exploiting the features of social media platforms. For

example, in examining Instagram, Marwick (2015) argued that microcelebrities are compelled to be more selective of what they upload because Instagram's newsfeed and editing tools focus on creating and viewing beautiful photos. Marwick mentioned in the same article that Twitter's dynamics and emphasis on short messages limit users to uploading a constant stream of short messages to become visible to their followers. Rui and Whinston (2012) argue that, while Twitter is considered a platform for information dissemination, uploading and creating content is still motivated by the need to garner attention.

In the end, attention economies are about aspirations and expressing idealized versions of the self (boyd, 2008; Marwick, 2015; Papacharissi, 2012). Marwick (2015) calls this "aspirational production" (p. 156), wherein users portray their aspirations of living a life of "glamour, luxury, wealth, good looks, and connections" (p. 141). What is clear in the literature on microcelebrities is that fame is an attractive motivation for social media users who "strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status" (Marwick, 2015, p. 138; Senft, 2008). As attention is quantified and measured through engagements and relationships, higher numbers have become determinants of success and status (Marwick, 2015). But why do microcelebrities search for fame? Is fame the be-all and end-all for microcelebrities? Does fame mean different for many types of microcelebrities. For instance, what does fame mean for amateur gay pornographers, and what motivates their desire to be famous? Below, I illustrate how amateur gay pornographers in Hong Kong and Manila generate fame and attract attention.

Strategies of Self-Presentation in Pornographic Circuits

This section expands on the arguments made in the literature and shows how gay pornographers in Manila and Hong Kong exert their creativity (see Marwick, 2015, for example, in the context of luxury brand influencers) when engaging attention economy. It centers on two specific strategies—the serialization of pornography and self-branding practices on Twitter porn networks.

Serialization of Pornography on Twitter

Serialization of content is not endemic to Twitter, and episodic series/serials were first found in other media, such as literature, newspapers, television, and even films (Broe, 2019; Hagedorn, 1995; Tischleder, 2017). In terms of economics, serials or series are expensive but are potentially very profitable products, making the format uncondusive for experimentation (Tischleder, 2017). Commercial television networks, for example, produce or cancel programs based on their performance ratings. Serials are structured to garner high ratings by maintaining audience interest and encouraging them to watch the next episode or season (Engell, 2019; Hagedorn, 1995). For example, TV shows and streaming programs usually end episodes and seasons on cliffhangers or are intentionally vague, suggesting the possibility of continuation. Recently, streaming services, such as Netflix and HBO, have started funneling bigger budgets into their serial dramas, making way for cinematic visuals and complex narratives to generate viewership or increase the platforms' membership in lieu of television ratings (Broe, 2019).

Seriality has also found its way into social media, with both fiction and non-fictional works written in an episodic manner. Andersen (2017), in investigating fictional serial works released on Twitter, argues

that Twitter's character limitations provide avenues for creativity. Andersen argues that Twitter enables authors to carefully plot when they can release each installment, thereby investing the gaps or silence between tweets with potential meanings or narrative value. The narrative value here means that any tweet or absence of it shall bring the reader closer to the ending or contribute to the meaning-making process. Meanwhile, Page (2013) argues that the Internet is replete with serial non-fiction works, such as wikis or live news coverage, that do not necessarily bring the reader close to an ending. Page (2013) calls this "non-teleological storytelling" (p. 31). Microcelebrities, it can be argued, produce non-teleological narratives because they continuously produce narratives and content that do not necessarily lead to a clearly established ending. Microcelebrities' social media accounts are ongoing accounts of their lives, regardless of how staged or authentic they are, without a definite ending in sight.

One basic way of serializing pornography is to splice an existing sex video into a few parts. Each installment is then uploaded at regular intervals (Cao, 2022b). In Figure 1 below, the pornographer uploaded the videos in immediate succession. Each part of the video is marked by a number and sometimes a title to denote this specific series of tweets. Each installment brings us closer to some sort of an ending to that specific sexual encounter, with each part getting more engagements and video views.



Figure 1. Two parts of a porn video series released episodically on Twitter. Screenshots by the author. The images were redacted to protect the privacy of the people in the images and preserve confidentiality, even if the posts were uploaded publicly.

While it is easy to imagine the serialization of porn as solely an outcome of Twitter's algorithms and features, I argue that individual pornographers are skilled at turning these "limitations" into something they can exploit. Instead of limiting or compressing their porn videos into two minutes, pornographers use this feature to garner more attention. Serialized porn demands planning and creativity from the uploader. As Benedict tells me:

It is challenging to keep producing videos and photos for my followers. When I was active, I was studying and I lived with a roommate. Of course, I can only shoot videos when I'm alone. I copied what other alter [users] have been doing, which is to make episodes out of my videos, then release them in two parts. I release a teaser first, like the first parts of me [masturbating], then another one tomorrow or a couple of days later when I [ejaculate]. [...] This way, I get more followers and retweets for my posts. (Benedict, personal communication, 2021).

Serializing porn is a means of economizing available resources in the face of ephemerality on Twitter, the platform's affordances, the affective value of social engagements on Twitter, and the real-life dispositions of gay men. As Murthy (2011) writes, tweets are "vanishing after their 15 minutes in the limelight" (p. 786). Murthy contends that Twitter's newsfeed mechanisms render content ephemeral. Even if these tweets are present, persistent, and searchable (boyd, 2010), it does not mean that they are always visible, especially when new content from other users comes in.

Serialization can be interpreted as a way of garnering attention within a saturated and ever-changing environment and as a way of economizing limited resources. As Marwick (2015) describes, these frequent bursts of short messages are all geared towards maintaining some form of fleeting presence on the newsfeed of the pornographers' followers. Serialization is also a way of expressing accessibility in an attention economy. By constantly uploading new videos or content, followers become privy to the "private" sexual lives of pornographers with a promise of the next episode, installment, or series. Serialization is thus seen as the way users exert creativity by harnessing the limitations of the platform, extending the life of limited resources, and using these limitations to garner more attention.

Self-Branding

Self-branding is an important part of microcelebrity practices (Senft, 2013). For gay pornographers, this means curating content or maintaining consistent elements that can concretize how they imagine their sexual selves to be. Some specify the type of sex partners they feature in their profiles, while others employ visual elements that they use to construct an online identity. A pornographer is expected to stick consistently to their specific individual characteristics, taste, and communicative, visual, and narrative techniques.

Some, like Raymond and Ross, only feature a specific type of gay man in their profiles. Raymond only features smooth-skinned, muscular, or slender college men. He maintains this visually by asking his sex partners to wear something that identifies their respective institutional affiliations. This can range from jerseys containing the colors of one's school to official athletic shirts emblazoned with elite Manila universities' insignia. Meanwhile, Ross only features *barako* men. *Barako* in Tagalog is originally a type of coffee, but it also refers to virile and well-built men. The closest translation of *barako* is "stud," but *barako* includes a particular physique, lifestyle, and behavior. A *barako* is almost always a working-class man with a big frame (usually muscular or meaty) and a dark skin tone. A *barako's* masculine capital stems from his association with hard labor, their performance of homonormative masculinity, and their dripping sex appeal. Ross's partners exemplify these categories. They are mostly stout, tanned, and older men who perform passionate sex with Ross. Unlike Raymond's younger partners whose actions emphasize fast, hard, and

noisy sexual gestures to signify superior sexual performance, Ross's partners are more controlled in performing sexual acts. Ross tells in his tweets that these older *barako* men move in a more rhythmic manner. If the situation allows, Ross has his partners dress in uniforms that easily identify their jobs, such as that of a security guard.



Figure 2a. A tweet by Raymond with a college man wearing a red shirt with white stripes. The shirt shows the name and mascot of a famous university in Manila. The tweet reads, "Red Lion Bae just bit his lips and stuck his tongue out in bliss while he is impregnating me."
Figure 2b. Raymond made another video with "Red Lion Bae" but this time with another college man named "Clingy Tamaraw" who is wearing a yellow shirt with the words "Braver Today" in green. Notice that the letter V is shaped like a bull's horn. The tweet reads, "It's Red Lion Bae's turn to pound my hot hole while Clingy Tamaraw feeds me his fat dick." Screenshots by the author. The images were redacted to protect the privacy of the people in the images and preserve confidentiality even if the posts were uploaded publicly.

The amateur gay porn scene in Hong Kong is saturated with images of bulky, toned, and hairless gay men. There may be a few slim or meaty guys in between, but for the most parts, the Chinese Hong Kong-based pornographers on Twitter are mostly gym-fit, toned, or slim guys. And unlike their Filipino counterparts who are not concerned about when and where their sexual encounters happen (these can be in cheap love hotels or their own homes), the pornographers in Hong Kong shoot videos at expensive hotels, with some even showing expensive views of Victoria Harbour. Lam sometimes did this on his Twitter videos. He would post photos or videos of him in a luxurious hotel bed or bathtub. Josh relates this to housing problems in Hong Kong. With many single Hong Kong men still residing with their parents, hotels have become a practical solution to this issue. However, a hotel does more than provide space. Lam has his own place—a subdivided flat—but he rarely invites people to have sex with him there. Instead, he checks into a hotel and starts inviting people who want to collaborate with him in porn videos. Lam said that there are two reasons for this. The first is the security that a hotel room offers. When asked why they chose to just go to a hotel, Lam said, "Your neighbors can't see you bringing a man into your room." To protect against

the intrusion of their neighbors into their private lives, gay men such as Lam spend a few hundred or thousands of dollars once in a while to have sex.

However, going to expensive hotels is also indicative of how gay men project themselves living a certain lifestyle where luxury and sex intertwine. Such visual strategies allow gay men to factor in their socioeconomic class in generating and maintaining erotic capital. Hotel rooms provide a nice background and the luxury of spending money and time away from work, a luxury that only people of certain socioeconomic classes can afford. Considering Ross's activities with the *barako* men, working-class men are always "invited" into the domestic spaces of these middle-class pornographers, instantly imbuing the whole affair with class and gender dimensions. It is the middle-class men who have control over their own spaces, thus positioning the middle-class pornographers with more desirability and masculine power. With Ross, there is a reversal of the relationship between the masculine *barako* and the middle-class gay man. It is not the working-class *barako* who "bends" gay men; rather, it is the middle-class gay men who attract the masculine *barako* by virtue of class.

Scholars have argued that masculinity and class are always intertwined, with certain socioeconomic classes of men espousing different ways of boosting their erotic or masculine capital (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Tan, 1995; Tolentino, 2009). Tolentino (2009) argued that the bodies of working-class men (i.e., the *barako*) are molded after the "standards of service sector industries" (p. 58). As Tan (1995) and Tolentino (2009) noted, working-class gay men are expected to perform in a more heterosexual manner, while upper-class men are allowed more leeway in expressing their masculinity. Kong (2020) argues that the younger generation of Chinese gay men emphasizes "greater sexual exposure and pleasure, more open relationship possibilities, and a greater chance of upward social mobility" (p. 1016), scripts that are created under the ambit of heteronormativity. However, Kong also argues that Chinese gay men in Hong Kong (as well as Shanghai) are not totally divorced from social institutions that impose expectations on men. Hence, even while navigating sociotechnical spaces where gay men can express their sexual identities and desires, many still express traditional characteristics and qualities that boost their masculine and erotic capital. The erotic capital of gay men increases as they climb the socioeconomic ladder; hence, the proliferation of sex videos in expensive hotel rooms, the display of gym-fit bodies, the presentation of university affiliations, and even the participation of the *barako* in the videos of a white-collar gay man. These are all aimed at using signifiers of class superiority to boost pornographers' desirability in the attention economy.

To my participants, curating and maintaining a brand is all about managing the attention they receive from their followers. Of course, their initial objective is to accumulate likes. In a place where people only scroll and glance (Zulli, 2017), generating retweets and followers means that pornographers are likable. However, pornography is more than just fame. Lam, for example, tells me that the impetus to be a *mong wong* is about feeling good about himself by accumulating followers. Lam elaborates:

[Feeling good about myself] means knowing that other people find me attractive and that those people [may] like me back. When I show them pictures or videos of me jerking off or showing my feet, people tell me that they want to have sex with me, or that they think we'll be a good match. (Lam, personal communication, 2021).

To Lam, being looked at means he can activate other people's erotic or sexual feelings. However, more than that, the metrification of attention can be empowering. In Lam's case, although he may not be friends with so many people who follow him on Twitter, he feels good enough when people stop by to put a heart or retweet his photos. Lam tells me:

I'm not a handsome man. I'm not gym-fit. I'm slim. And the fact that I like feet play can turn other people off. So, when people stop by it feels nice when they find me attractive. At least I don't feel like a deviant or something.

Similarly, a user identified in a video as @waterlemon says in a YouTube interview about *mong wong* on Twitter², "I just want 'likes'. When I was with my ex, I felt like he didn't think I am sexually attractive enough. Then, somehow some of my photos were leaked on the internet, and people commented that they liked me" (棉褲哥哥 [Brother Min Fu], 2021, 00:37–00:49). This is echoed by Benedict, who tells me:

When I was really active on alter, I am pleased by the higher number of retweets. Then I had more followers. Before, I only had like 10, 20 followers. In a few days after I uploaded videos of me masturbating or touching myself, it became 100, then 200. Later on, more people started to send me messages. Some were asking to meet me in real life, others just wanted to say hello and have friends. More often, it's because my followers wanted to have sex.

But there comes a point when pornographers need to manage the attention they are getting. There is a point when simply getting likes and followers is not enough, so likes from specific people who share their sexual and erotic tastes become desirable. It is not enough to derive pleasure from simply being looked at but being able to manage who can look at them. Lam, who is mainly aroused by male feet, tells me that Twitter is a good app to filter people who can look at him and therefore manage what kind of attention he is getting. Lam says, "If I use my Grindr at home, how many people actually like to have feet fun around me? Maybe two, sometimes none." Twitter does not have a very restrictive limit on how many profiles one can visit. Lam curates his profile because by "narrowcasting" his attraction for feet, he can find and be found by other gay men who share the same tastes and interests as him.

Discussion and Conclusion

Are Twitter pornographers microcelebrities? In some ways, they follow the conventional meanings of the word "microcelebrity"; in others, they challenge the boundaries of this term. They are microcelebrities because they engage in self-branding practices to establish their presence in their followers' feeds and accumulate more followers, retweets, or likes. They are known within a niche community and are careful not to make their existence known to outsiders. They engage in immaterial and affective labor aimed at cultivating a certain emotional relationship with their followers (Duguay, 2019; Senft, 2008). However, what separates pornographers from conventional microcelebrities is that they do not see their followers as mere

² The quotes were translated with the help of the participant Josh.

fans. The followers are potential friends, sex partners, or simply people who give words of affirmation. Hence, the “fans” are not simply a fodder for a higher number of social engagements but a source of emotional and psychological satisfaction for the pornographers.

Unlike the microcelebrities that other scholars describe (e.g., Marwick, 2015, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2011), pornographers are not merely engaged in amateur pornography for the sake of fame or aspirations. The participants of this study equate fame with acceptance. The more important thing for pornographers is to experience a sense of belonging and establish some form of affective bond with other gay men. Certainly, there is an aspirational element to being accepted for queer men because acceptance is usually out of reach outside the realms of Twitter. While pornography remains a kind of “aspirational production” that embodies gay men’s sexual aspirations, these are not merely geared towards acquiring fame for the sake of fame. Rather, for gay men, accumulating retweets and followers is about feeling accepted for their sexuality. Having repressed their sexuality all their lives, the media allows them to seek to belong and experience their sexuality in the realm of the everyday. Media allows gay men to socialize and experience sexual arousal in the confines of their own private spaces by giving them real-time and measurable information that can be easily construed as acceptance. In other words, users experience and live these aspirations, even momentarily, within the constraints of digital media.

Attention economy works within a neoliberal framework (see Foster, 2016) in the sense that it operates within the premise of accumulation of attention. Attention is accumulated, quantified, amplified, and metrified by social media platforms, and attention economy ultimately replicates neoliberal (gendered) relations and homonormative masculinity. Attention economy demands that users become entrepreneurial by harnessing the power of images to channel their authentic desires into commodities that can be easily distributed and consumed within a neoliberal framework. As Ahmed (2010) notes, neoliberal rationality turns happiness (and by extension, acceptance, and belonging) into personal responsibility that can only be satisfied (or will never be satisfied) by accumulating higher numbers of followers and retweets. Whether these likes truly mean genuine approval cannot be ascertained by this research. What this paper argues is that for gay men, acceptance and approval can be easily conflated with a high number of social engagements. However, it is difficult to admonish neoliberalism entirely because it is only in neoliberal (and online) spaces, such as Twitter, that gay men can express their sexuality and find a sense of belonging. It is only in these spaces that one’s individuality is instituted not only through the establishment of an online persona but also because these spaces are symbolic of the supremacy of individual desires over social imperatives, even in a limited sense.

Yet, we must be cautious in celebrating the triumph of individuality and queerness in attention economy. This paper argues that there is a certain complicity between attention economy (and neoliberalism) and homonormative masculinity. The cases in this paper suggest that gay men resort to homonormative masculinity to seek attention and belongingness. In this context, heteronormativity lies at the intersection of class and gender, which makes more certain classes of masculinity more visible than others. Hence, those who gain attention and feel accepted by other gay men are those who best perform or exhibit class superiority and gender ideals. Part of the reason neoliberalism masks patriarchy is that technologies are limited in addressing social inequalities. As Lik Sam Chan (2021) argued in the case of dating apps in China, “technology alone cannot ameliorate a societal problem” because technologies “are

also used by men who compete for power” (p. 52). While social media allows gay men to experience belongingness, it is grounded in the successful performance of homonormative masculinity. Thus, the potential of social media to eradicate gender and sexual inequalities is limited by its position within the larger gender and sexual politics, and this is dominated by heteronormativity.

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