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# **Travelling for Becoming a 'Normal' Gay Man:**

Liminality, Sexual fields, and  
Gay Taiwanese Men's Sex Tourism to Bangkok

**Yo-Hsin Yang**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Geography, Durham University

March 2019



# Abstract

## **Travelling for Becoming a ‘Normal’ Gay Man:**

*Liminality, Sexual fields, and Gay Taiwanese Men’s Sex Tourism to Bangkok*

**Yo-Hsin Yang**

This thesis investigates gay Taiwanese men’s engagements in sex tourism in Bangkok. It bases on an one-year fieldwork conducted in Taiwan and Bangkok, involving an ethnography and follow-up interviews. I played multiple roles—researcher, peer, tour guide and a sexualised subject in the research process. The combination of methods and my different identities offers an intervention into methodological debates concerned with challenging the possibility of ‘the singular truth’ in research and the appropriateness of a researcher’s ‘sexual participation’. Thus, this has elicited an alternative rationale and praxis for studying sexual practices.

Through the theoretical lens of liminality sexual fields, this thesis argues that gay Taiwanese men intensively engage in different sexual practices in Bangkok not simply because they are switching to the ‘Bangkok mode’, a particular hypersexual state generated by the specific liminal time-space of traveling to this city. Also, their engagements in these sexual practices are due to their understanding of Bangkok as either an advantageous or democratic sexual field that enhances their sexual desirability. Thus, travelling to Bangkok becomes a synonym of having more opportunities of socio-sexual interactions with other gay men.

As fieldwork for this research shows, gay Taiwanese men engage in socio-sexual interactions for more than just sex, but also for accruing sexual capital in its multiple forms. This thesis argues that these gay men accrue sexual capital in order to enhance their (images of) sexual desirability and hence becoming a ‘normal’ gay man. The thesis concludes that Taiwanese gay men undertake sex tourism to escape from, submit to, and as a form of re-negotiation with the normalisations relating to sexual morality and sexual desirability of gay men in Taiwan.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*Hah? You have never been to Bangkok? Are you kidding me? You know what, none of us [gay men] can assert that he is a ‘real’ gay man without travelling to Bangkok and doing all of ‘these things’ (Joe, 51 years old, interview before my pilot study)*

*Yes...travelling to Bangkok is one of my dreams. I want to go to every kind of gay spaces and participate in all of the sexual activities there. My friends said this will facilitate me to become a ‘normal’ gay man (Ren, 37 years old, follow-up interview)*

### 1.1 ‘Coming out’ gay tourism in East Asian academia

Over the last few decades, gay men travelling to Bangkok for sex has become one of the most notable social phenomena in Taiwan. The notability of this phenomenon manifests itself in not just a Mandarin guidebook ‘The gay male backpacking to Bangkok’ (HUGO et al. 2014) which introduces Bangkok’s gay male cultures and different gay spaces in detail, and has been revised three times.<sup>1</sup> But also, there are plenty of online resources which offer information for gay male tourists to Bangkok. For instance, a Facebook group called ‘Thai Fever’ which has more than 30,000 members,<sup>2</sup> is one of the most popular platforms for Mandarin-speaking gay men to share their personal experiences of participating in various forms of sexual activities in Thailand particularly Bangkok. This phenomenon raises many questions including why do many gay Taiwanese men travel to

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<sup>1</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> edition of this guidebook dates from 2009 and the one cited in the thesis is its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition

<sup>2</sup> This figure was recorded on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2018

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Bangkok and intensively engage in sexual activities during the travel? What is the meaning of these transnational sexual practices for this group of gay men? Ten years ago, I wrote a dissertation proposal and aimed to address these questions for my master degree in 'culture and tourism', which was rejected by the committee of the institute as they claimed that this research topic is 'improper' and not 'cultural' enough.

This experience demonstrates how gay tourism has yet to be given much attention in East Asian academia especially tourism studies. Firstly, viewing gay men's sex tourism as an improper topic in part discloses the implicit stigmatisation of sex in Taiwanese academia. Although there have been had many studies relevant to the LGBTQs people across different disciplines, their sexuality is still regarded as a controversial issue which the higher education sector inclines to keep in the closet instead of discussing in the research realm publicly. Second, the comment that gay tourism is 'not cultural enough' as a topic for a master's dissertation also unveils a long-lasting anxiety of tourism studies, which considers it to be an unserious topic for academia (see Franklin and Crang 2001). Moreover, my hesitations at the time of defending the legitimacy of this research topic also explicates why research on gay men's travel, especially when it is associated with sex, has been absent in Taiwanese academia. First of all, I was fearful of that connecting gay men with sex tourism to some extent would reinforce the extant stereotype of promiscuousness of this specific sexual minority, which is a principal argument that conservatives claim when denying LGBTQs' citizenship (Duggan 2003, Richardson 2005). Secondly, as sex itself is highly private and sensitive, many difficulties concerning research the practicality of the research and the ethics of investigating it can be expected (Binnie 1994). Thirdly, I personally was worried about the risk of being labelled as promiscuous due to conducting such a sexuality-focused topic (see section 2.4.1).

However, all of these factors which contribute to the absence of studies on gay men's sex tourism in academia, in turn, highlight the importance and necessity to undertake research that focuses on it. Firstly, the stereotype of gay men's sex

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tourism (and the research on it) in academia/society indeed highlights the need for further investigation of this topic especially with respect to uncovering their multiple purposes of engaging in this type of tourism. Secondly, exploring the reason why gay (male) tourists travel abroad for sex offers an alternative perspective to reflect on the social reality of their domestic/home society (Urry and Larsen 2011), which demonstrate the seriousness of tourism studies. Thirdly, when these tourists are gay men, this research topic then leads to a re-examination on the daily oppression that they face, which provides a chance to either deconstruct or rethink the stereotype of promiscuousness that is attached to them. Therefore, ten years later, I reclaim gay Taiwanese men's sex tourism in Bangkok as research subject of my doctoral thesis to make this once rejected topic 'come out' in the current scholarship of East Asia.

In this introductory chapter, I will firstly review extant works on gay tourism while particularly focusing on aspects of gay men's desires for travelling and points out the defects within this domain of inquiry. This is because most studies are dated, Western-centred and lack discussions of sexual practices. Following this, the subsequent section details the context of gay Taiwanese men travelling to Bangkok and expounds it is useful for responding the extant defects of gay tourism studies since this travel is a mixture of gay tourism and sex tourism that places in a non-Western setting which can be associated with a contemporary phenomenon of gay tourists travelling abroad from a society that is 'liberal' toward homosexuality. Besides, From the common parlance '*hui niang jia*' (*means going back to the family of original*)<sup>3</sup> which gay Taiwanese men used to describe their travels to Bangkok, the third part of the chapter unveils that many of these gay men remain confronting different oppressions and exclusions in their daily lives pertaining to their (homo)sexuality, which originate from different normalisations concerning gay men's sexual morality and sexual desirability in Taiwan. As will be exemplified in the thesis, these normalisations lead to a prevalent anxiety among participants

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<sup>3</sup> A specific tradition in Chinese culture, which is akin to Mothering Sunday in UK, more detailed introduction sees section 1.3.2

about whether they are a 'qualified' or 'normal' gay man, which is then entangled with their sexual practices in, and travel to Bangkok. The chapter then proposes that the axis of this thesis lies in illustrating that engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok is the way(s) which gay Taiwanese men escape from, submit to, and negotiate with the normalisations aforementioned for the sake of relieving and coping with their anxiety about being a 'qualified' or 'normal' gay man. The chapter ends with offering a map of the whole thesis, which presents gay Taiwanese men's multifaceted purposes for and experiences of engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok.

### 1.2 Revisiting gay tourism

Gay tourism has been a term with divergent definitions, which from a market-oriented perspective, is used to indicate a niche in the tourism industry that targets for LGBTQs tourists (Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2016).<sup>4</sup> Some scholars define it as a holiday during which sexual minorities spend time in various gay spaces<sup>5</sup> to either express their gayness and interact with other like-minded people (Hughes and Deutsch 2010, Coon 2012). Nevertheless, other scholarship underlines gay tourism as a form of travel which is no different from its heterosexual counterpart (Pritchard et al. 1998, Clift et al. 2002, Graham 2002). However, amidst this work, Hughes develops a typological framework that incorporate different forms of gay holiday as a continuum of 'non-gay, gay-related and gay centric' which is in line with the degrees that sexual identities involve in LGBTQs tourists' trips (Hughes, 2006). No matter to what degree sexual identity is involved in tourism; Pritchard et al. (2000) identify the sexuality indeed plays an important role in impacting gay men and lesbian tourists' choices of holiday destinations and hence argue that gay tourism is a domain of inquiry which needs further investigation.

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<sup>4</sup> What need to address here is that the research is aware of the term 'LGBTQs' is somehow generalised as each group of these non-heteronormative minorities (such as gay man and lesbian) indeed has its distinct culture in terms of travelling. However, since the extant works on this topic focus on either different or multiple groups of LGBTQs, this chapter then use this overarching term.

<sup>5</sup> According to literature of gay tourism, the term 'gay space' represents a 'physical manifestation of gay community' which usually manifested in constellation of spatially discrete commercial and leisure spaces include pubs, clubs, cafes, shops or even a broader gay precinct such as the 'Gay Village' in Manchester.



Gay tourism as a research subject in academia is embodied in three strands. First of all, due to it is an important part of the 'pink-economy', a huge body of scholarship offers a supply-and-demand analysis to explore this niche market (see Holcomb and Luongo 1996, Pritchard et al. 1998, Hughes 2005). Moreover, initiating from the concern of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) another group of gay tourism literature focuses on discerning travel-related sexual practices (see Clift and Wilkins 1995, Forrest and Clift 1998, Clift and Forrest 1999a, Clift and Carter 2000). Lastly, the third strand of studies of gay tourism based on the dimension of 'sexuality and space' (Waitt and Markwell 2006, Hughes 1997, 2002, 2006) that appropriates the works from geographies of sexuality (see Bell 1991, Duncan 1996, Bell and Valentine 1995, Ingram et al. 1997, Binnie and Valentine 1999, Puar et al. 2003, Valentine 2000a, 2002, Knopp and Brown 2003) to explicate LGBTs travel abroad in part are associated with the different types of discriminations and/or exclusions they confront in social spaces, which originate from heteronormativity and homophobia in their everyday lives.

In terms of geographies of sexualities, it has accumulated a great body of works which elucidates the entanglement between (homo)sexual identities, desires and practices and different scales of spaces. These works show not only LGBTQs' experiences of being repressed or negotiating in 'the straight world' from housing to workplaces (see Bouthillette 1997, McDowell 1995, Valentine 1993), but also how these sexual minorities occupy, remake and sexualise given places as gay spaces including both public areas and commercial venues (Murray 1995, Hart 1995, Hemmings 1997, Ingram 1997). In Grube's (1997) words, gay space is expanded and contracted through the 'complex interplays between the state's attempts (such as law and homophobia design of environment) to restrict these spaces and the resilience of networks that continue to deepen links under repression' (p.127). This resilience usually embodies in the appeal for 'constructing the gay commercial neighbourhood as a territory' (Grube 1997, p.142), which initiates an inclination for privatising gay spaces. However, as some empirical works revealed, gay spaces 'do not exist in isolation from each other but are part of numerous circuits and

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networks' (Brown 2008, p.924) that connecting through both different activities and physical conduits (such as paths and roads). To reiterate, gay spaces is more like a horizontal landscape as a whole within which contains 'a serious of dialects, including those between expanding sexual expression and repression, between zones of public and private, and between sexual and various communal identities' (Ingram 1997, p.106).

Although the relationship between gay men and space is multifold, sex is the most significant aspect. In *Queers in Space*, Ingram, Bouthillett and Retter (1997, p.10) claim that even if they 'searched diligently to find a broad range of contributors', this edited book 'still reflects the dichotomy of women forging communality in spaces and men having sex in it'. Indeed, the formation of gay male spaces initiated from outdoor sites where host 'perverse possibilities' (Bell 1997) and members of sexual minorities regularly frequent to engage in sexual acts, which temporarily transforms these sites into public sex environments (Ingram 1997). In these environments, many scholars found out that gay men can more than just have casual sex, but also learn social skills, exchange information, get peer support and form the sense of community/communality, which are essential for establishing their (homo)sexual identity (Ingram 1997, Grube 1997, Delany 1999). From embodied experiences in gay men's 'sex on premise' venues (a theatre mainly) at Time Square, New York's, Delany (1999) underlines the connection between gay identity, (interclass) sexual contacts, and gay spaces and asserts that 'the freedom to be gay without any of existing gay institution...means nothing' (p.193).

However, a series of studies (Cream 1995, Hemmings 1995, Bell 1995, Murray 1995, Munt 1995) has recognised 'the multiplicity of sexualities and the fluid and contextual nature of sexual identities' in different scales of geographical locale, which complicated the connection between gay identity, sex and spaces. Moreover, Brown (2008) further detaches this connection through emphasising that gay men's sexual contacts associate more with the materiality of the given space such as its location, physical environment, and objects (including others' bodies) within it. Literally, there had been a 'material turn' in the geography of sexuality, which

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called for re-incorporating the analysis of political-economy into research. As Binnie (1995) critiques, previous research in this domain of inquiry tends to overlook the role of markets and capitals in constructing gay spaces. Similarly, Quilley also argues that constructions of gay spaces associate with the broader context of political-economy that 'extends far beyond the agency of gay men' such as their interest, actions and desires (Quilley 1997, p.277). Binnie and Skeggs (2004) further exemplified this 'political-economy turn'. Through the case of Manchester's Gay Village, they explain how 'the capitalist desire for opening new markets for leisure consumption with new forms of branding' intersects with 'the desire for the territorialisation of space by campaigning gay and lesbian groups, has led to the formation of a "gay space" marketed as a cosmopolitan spectacle', in which the connection between gay identity and gay spaces 'becomes a matter of access and knowledge' (Binnie and Skeggs 2004, p.39). To reiterate, in the era of marketing gay spaces, equipping with 'right personae to pass through and occupy these spaces' has become a prerequisite for being a 'proper' user of them (Binnie and Skeggs 2004, p.40). Therefore, individuals without the given 'right' personae are usually excluded from gay spaces, which leads them to amend themselves in order to conform to the notion of 'proper' identity/image in these spaces. For many scholars and activists, this self-amendment is nothing but an irony of the origin of gay spaces. That is, from a radical perspective, gay spaces exist not just for satisfying LGBTQs' social and sexual needs but also having their political aspiration for disturbing or even subverting (heterosexual) normalcy of the society, which is essential for liberating sexual minorities from different sorts of repression (Thomas 1996, Lindell 1996, Delany 1999).

Appropriating from current works of geographies of sexuality, the third strand of gay tourism studies conceptualised this tourism as three interlocking stages. Firstly, it proposes gay tourism symbolises an escape that LGBTQs travel from heteronormative and homophobia hometown to another 'safe places' where accept and tolerate their non-heteronormative sexuality (Hughes 1997, 2000, 2002). Secondly, another stage is seeking out gay spaces since the heteronormativity in LGBTQs' daily lives means these spaces are scarce or obligates them to be discreet

with their gay identity. This then fuels their desires for travelling abroad to access gay spaces (Hughes 1997, 2006, Waitt and Markwell 2006). The existence of gay space is important for gay tourism since it is not only an indicator of safety, namely tolerance and gay-friendliness toward non-heteronormative minorities in a given touristic destination, but also it *per se* is the 'safe space' for which LGBTQs travel. Because as many of these works exemplify, gay space offers opportunities for LGBTQs to 'be themselves' or (socially or sexually) interact with other like-minded people, which are crucial for them to articulate their sexual orientation and develop a sense of belonging to the gay community (Pritchard et al. 1998, Cox 2001, 2002, Hughes 2006, Hughes and Deutsch 2010). This articulation of and belonging in gay spaces is essential for LGBTQs to establish gay sexual identity, which is the last stage of gay tourism. In specifying the connection between gay spaces and gay identity, Hughes argues that confirming this identity and 'live as a homosexual' often requires reference points that are available only in gay space (2006, p.43) while Waitt et al. (2008, p.792) further claim it is through visiting gay spaces, the non-heterosexuals 'become more aware of how they constantly negotiate their [sexual] subjectivities through dress, movement, speech and interactions with people', which is especially significant in the cases of 'camp performances' in Gay Pride Parade (see Johnston 2005, 2007). Therefore, gay tourism itself is conceptualized as a quest for establishing the certainty of gay identity (Howe 2001, Herrera and Scott 2005).

### **1.2.1 The call for a non-Western and 'contemporary' perspective**

Nevertheless, critiques of this three-staged perspective, namely viewing gay tourism as a way for LGBTs to escape heteronormativity and/or homophobia, to seek out gay spaces, and to establish gay identity, have been presented in recent studies, which mainly arise from the updated and cultural concerns. Firstly, Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy (2016) assert that most of the academic literature of gay tourism was published decades ago, which is 'arguably dated' (p.414) because the social tolerance and legal acceptance (such as decriminalisation of same-sex acts or gay marriage) of homosexuality have changed over time in many countries.

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These societal changes have impacted upon gay tourists' 'motivations, experiences and destination choices' of travelling, which are pivotal realities that current research about gay tourism 'has failed to adapt' (Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2016, p.414). For example, Monterrubio (2009) discloses that the younger generation of gay people at present may no longer need to travel to 'be gay' as their gay sexual identity has been widely accepted by themselves and others in daily social milieus. Thus, why do contemporary gay tourists particularly the ones from countries that are sexually 'liberal' toward non-heterosexuality still travel to specific places? What are they escaping from and seeking out through gay tourism are queries to which still wait for further investigation.

Furthermore, from a queer stance which critiques the tendency in current research on LGBTQs to concentrate on studying privileged (namely affluent, male, White) gays and hence overlooked the living experiences of the rest gay people, Waitt et al. (2008) also highlight that there is an Anglo-biased and Western/White-centric paradigm in gay tourism studies. Echoing this critique, Wong and Tolkach (2017) call for more research on Asian gay tourists' travel experiences because not only is there a significant absence of this work in academia, but also because gay identity in the complex social context of Asia has diverse meanings and distinct establishing processes (Huang 2011, Kong 2011) which differ from its 'Western archetype'. This research calls me to reflect upon whether gay identity which is established through gay tourism as many extant works assert, is singular or plural? To be more specific, combining the updated concerns mentioned above, does gay identity refer to merely sexual orientation of non-heterosexuals and hence 'being gay' in the contemporary and/or non-Western context simply means 'coming out', or does it in fact involve other prerequisites? If so, what are these prerequisites of contemporary and non-Western gay identity (or identities), and how do they relate to gay tourism? Thus, including gay people's motivations, experiences and destination choices for travelling, is another research terrain which this thesis seeks to develop.

### 1.2.2 The missing discussion on sex

Apart from establishing how gay identity is experienced and/or constructed, another considerable discussion in current gay tourism research points out that LGBTQs especially gay men travel for sex. This illustrates that gay men's tourism in part overlaps with sex tourism. Although there are several studies disclose that the notion of gays and lesbians travelling for sex is a great myth (Mansergh et al. 2001, Ryan and Hall 2001, Hughes and Deutsch 2010), many other works demonstrate that having sex is one of the most important reasons that motivate gay men to travel (Clift and Forrest 1999b, 2000, Hughes 1997, 2006, Mendoza 2013, Monterrubio 2009, Pritchard et al. 2000, Waitt and Markwell, 2006). Among these works, two principal perspectives in understanding why gay men engage in sexual activities when travelling are presented.

Firstly, Waitt and Markwell (2006, p.249) argue that having sex as a motivation for travel relates to the geographical imagination of a destination (see also the discussion of 'place myth' in 3.2.1), namely the destinations in which they visit have a 'gay reputation'. This 'gay reputation' indicates a romanticised and eroticised view of non-Western countries and regions, which usually associate these places with 'more liberal and less restrained in sexual lives' including the acceptance of same-sex desires (Hughes 2006, p.52 see also Aldrich 1993, Altman 2001, Cantu 2002). As some studies have shown, the romanticised and eroticised view of particular non-Western countries and regions are produced by gay guidebooks or gay tour operators. This offer information about 'where commercial or causal sexual encounters can be found' (Monterrubio 2009, p.163) or explicitly use sexualised images to represent these countries and regions (Hughes 2002). For some scholars, these representations embody a Western-centered neo-colonial discourse (Puar 2002b, Nast 2002, Waitt et al. 2008).

Secondly, other scholarship demonstrates that the entanglement between gay men's tourism and sex also originates from the anonymous time-space which is provided by tourism itself that offers gay male tourists the freedom to act

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differently whilst on holiday. These acts include not only liberally articulating their sexual identity but also engaging in different sexual activities which transgress social orders and hence are forbidden in their daily lives (Hughes 1997, 2006, Ivy 2001). This 'freedom' perspective in understanding gay tourism's entanglement with sex in part resembles the concept of 'liminality' (more detail see chapter 3) that is commonly used in research on sex tourism (see Hall and Ryan 2001). For example, in Selänniemi's study (2003) on Finnish sun seeking tourists, he demonstrates how the spatio-temporal transition of tourism intimately relates to tourists' transgressions of social orders especially with regards to taking part in certain sexual practices.

However, although the overlap between gay tourism and sex tourism has been identified, the studies which bridge these two research subfields remain rare. In terms of works on sex tourism, as Hughes (2006) points out, several extant edited books on sex (and) tourism (see Clift and Carter 2000, Hall and Ryan 2001, Bauer and McKercher, 2003) are still highly 'firmly heterosexually focused' whilst the volumes concerning LGBTQs' experiences within these books are apparently inadequate (p.4). On the other hand, although a few studies on gay tourism have discussed issues of sex (see Nyanzi 2005, Padilla 2007, Mitchell 2011, Mendoza 2013), most of them are based on commercial sex and center on exploring the relationship between local sex workers and foreign clients, which leave sexual encounters that are either outside the realm of prostitution or among gay tourists being uncharted. The limited understanding of gay men's sex tourism in academia raises two queries. First, apart from the role of geographical imaginaries of and the promise of entering into 'liminal' spaces and states, is there any other reason that leads gay men to intensively engage in sexual practices when they travel to particular place(s)? Second, other than sex itself, what else do gay men seek when engaging in this sex tourism (include both commercial and non-commercial sexual practices)?

Through reviewing relevant literature on gay tourism, this section has uncovered the research gap within this domain of inquiry and outlined three key points:



namely the current works are mostly dated, Western-centred and lack discussions of sexual practices. In the next section, I will argue that my research into the experiences of gay Taiwanese men travelling to Bangkok has the potential to fill in this research gap. This is now discussed in more detail in the following section

### **1.3 The research Context: gay Taiwanese men travelling to Bangkok**

To further investigate gay tourism, I choose the context of gay Taiwanese men travelling to Bangkok as the research subject. This specific research context responds to the three main absences in current works in this research terrain. In this section, I now provide more context surrounding the specificities of this context by providing an overview of my participants' ordinary itinerary of travelling in Bangkok as well as the social milieu concerning homosexuality in Taiwan.

#### **1.3.1 The travel to Bangkok: a form of gay men's sex tourism**

Firstly, gay Taiwanese's men travel to Bangkok is a useful context from which to respond to the extant research gap because this travel is both a gay tourism and sex tourism. According to my ethnography of following participants (see section 2.3.1), I found out that a typical routine for gay Taiwanese men travelling in Bangkok begins from planning a cultural itinerary and leisure activities in the day time include visiting temples, (floating) markets and museums, going to shopping malls, famous café and (non-erotic) massage parlours or even just staying at the hotel to use its facilities such as spa, swimming pool and gym. However, since Bangkok is considered to be a 'hetero-sexual paradise' with a flourishing sex industry (See Bishop and Robinson 1998, Wilson 2004). This combines with sexually inclusive culture in Thailand (Jackson 2011), resulting in that most of the heterosexual facilities for sexual encounters in the city have also developed their gay equivalents (Sanders 2002). This particular social milieu makes Bangkok emerge as a sexual playground for gay men that offers participants numerous forms



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of gay spaces to arrange their schedule of ‘sexual practices’. In this research, the term sexual practices refer to not just various sexual activities and/or interactions in which participants engaged, but also their decisions concerned with where and with whom to have these activities and/or interactions.

Generally, participants’ sexual adventures in Bangkok starts from late afternoon or evening to midnight. The first stop of these adventures is usually erotic massage parlours—the space which offers a particular form of prostitution in Bangkok that combines oil massage and sexual intercourse (more detail see section 6.2.1), not only because these spaces open at late afternoon but also most of the participants are inclined to be the masseur’s first client of the day.<sup>6</sup> Besides, some participants tended to start their sexual adventures in gay saunas (see Figure 1)—a typical form of gay space that is usually located in a multi-story building and is composed of numerous areas including a dry sauna, steam bath, numerous small rooms and corridors with low lighting, Jacuzzi, gym and lounge where patrons can wander around to socialise or have sexual encounters with others. Participants usually went to gay saunas on either the weekend for their special events such as an orgy party, foam gathering and mask night or weekday evening as it is the peak time during which local patrons assemble to ‘have some fun’ after work and before going back home.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> From interviews, many participants explained this inclination originates from their beliefs that the masseurs would be more energetic in terms of sex when facing the first client of the day, which implies the possibility of offering better ‘service’ in this sexual transaction.

<sup>7</sup> This understanding of peak time of Bangkok’s gay saunas was mentioned by many participants as well as demonstrated by my participant observations



**Figure 1: Gay Sauna- Babylon (before the Foam gathering)**

After dinner, many participants then continue their sexual adventures through heading for a go-go bar— another form of space/prostitution which combines a set of performances includes go-go dance show, lip-sync, comedy separated by interludes of the ‘catwalk’ of nearly naked go-go boys who wear only sexy briefs with number tag on it (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).<sup>8</sup> In this kind of space, clients can merely watch the show by themselves or order the go-go boy to accompany them. If clients like the boy they ordered, they then could pay a given amount of commission fee to the owner of the bar to ‘take away’ this boy for further sexual interactions or company. The sexual adventures of participants mostly ends up with going to gay clubs around midnight (see Figure 4). In clubs, they not only

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<sup>8</sup> Here I use the pictures which I took in club FAKE to present the scene of ‘go-go dance’ and ‘catwalk’ since go-go bars in Bangkok strictly prohibit photography and video recording. However, it is noteworthy that the performers in these two pictures are just professional go-go dancers in FAKE, who generally cannot be ‘taken away’, which is different from the go-go boys in go-go bars.

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hang out with friends but also watch and are watched by or even flirt with strangers from which many romances or sexual encounters are initiated.

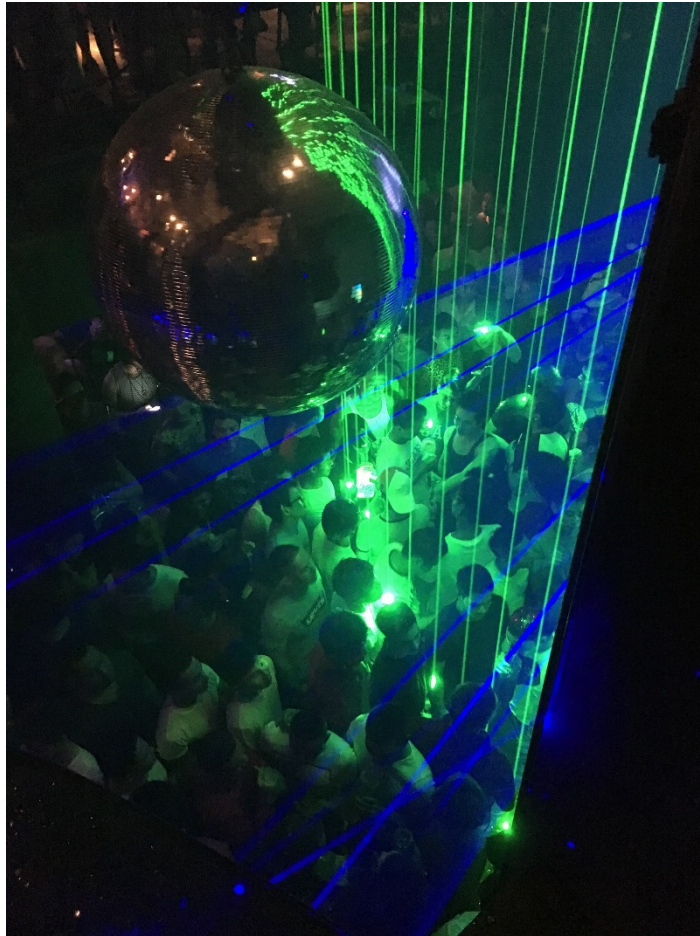


**Figure 2: Go-go dance (FAKE club)**



**Figure 3: The model Catwalk (FAKE club)**





**Figure 4: Gay Club- DJ Station**

A participants' typical itinerary in Bangkok which mixes cultural and leisure activities and sexual adventures demonstrates that their travels to this city are encapsulated in the scope of gay tourism as well as sex tourism. Since it on the one hand conforms to Hughes's typological framework of gay tourism as 'gay-related' holiday during which 'gay spaces are important but do not necessarily dominate other requirements' for gay tourists when they travel (Hughes 2006, p.58). On the other hand, this itinerary is also in line with the definition of sex tourism many scholars provide, in that it refers to not just transnational prostitution but also various forms of sexual encounters tourists have when travelling away from home in a general sense (Oppermann 1999, Ryan 2000, Clift and Carter 2000, Hall and Ryan 2001, Bauer and McKercher, 2003, Lopez-Lopez and Van Boreck 2010).

Nevertheless, in claiming gay Taiwanese men's travel to Bangkok is a mixture of gay tourism and sex tourism there are two points which need to be particularly

addressed. First of all, regarding seeing gay Taiwanese men's travels to Bangkok as a form of sex tourism, this research does not aim to generalise that 'all of them' travelling to this city 'only or mainly' for having sex as it does not conform to my participant observations. Indeed, I found out that there were also many cultural and non-sexual leisure activities included in their travel. However, it is still imperative to underline that gay Taiwanese men engaging in sex tourism in Bangkok is a notable socio-cultural phenomenon because according to many participants' self-reports, the frequency which they had sexual encounters in Bangkok is much higher than they were in daily lives or travel to other countries.

Furthermore, as this research will illustrate, this type of sex tourism is not just for the sake of sex itself as many participants intensively had sex when in Bangkok for some other purposes. Considering these multiple purposes, the thesis adopts the adjective 'socio-sexual' to describe both the interactions of and spaces in which participants were having sex with others. Because during the fieldwork, I observed that their sexual practices were generally entangled with sociality. For instance, many participants disclosed that when engaging in erotic massage, they not just had sex but also carried on many conversations (which are irrelevant to sex) with the masseurs while some of them even 'became friends' with them (see section 6.3.2), which showed that sexual practices in part is a medium for creating social connections. Also, it is common that in the gay clubs, participants' developed their one-night stands with other clubbers from drinking, having chitchat and dancing with them, which exemplified that social interactions are the preludes of sexual practices. These cases underscored that for gay Taiwanese men, sociality and sexuality are inseparable and interconnected which the following chapter in the thesis seek to uncover.

### **1.3.2 The case of Taiwan: a non-Western and 'liberal' society**

Secondly, studying gay Taiwanese men's travel to Bangkok is useful to fill in the research gap within gay tourism studies also because this transnational movement of men represents a non-Western context, which shed new light on existing Euro-

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Anglo centered works of this research domain. This non-Western context is provocative especially in terms of reexamining the connection between establishing gay identity and tourism that current studies emphasise. Since gay identity in Sinophone cultures<sup>9</sup> or to be more specific, in Taiwan, has its particular social meaning (Kong 2011, Walks 2014, Chiang and Wong 2016).

For example, the particularity of gay identity establishment in Taiwan manifests itself in the distinct consideration, approach and purpose of ‘coming-out’ for Taiwanese gays. Chou (2000) asserts that for a Chinese gay man, the key consideration he takes when coming out is not religion or workplace as a gay from Anglophone societies might, but family. Exemplifying this assertion, Wang et al. (2009) point out in Taiwanese society, ‘coming out’ may cause a gay man fail to conform to the Confucian ‘filial piety’<sup>10</sup>, which mainly concerning reproduction, namely carrying on the family name. This potential failure prevents many gay men in Taiwan from disclosing their sexual identities in the family. Instead, scholars found that Taiwanese gays and lesbians tend to ‘come out’ in a more delicate approach that is in accordance with different situations, which transcends the essentialist out/closeted dichotomy that has been created to make sense of the Anglophone West context. For instance, Martin (2003, p.195) advances the concept of ‘donning masks’ to illustrate that how gay men and lesbians in Taiwan ‘*yin*’ (means concealment in Mandarin) and *xiang* (means disclosure in Mandarin)’ their gay identity in a fluid way to be in line with different situations, which is analytically distinct from the conventional perception of ‘closet’.

Moreover, from a recent study, Brainer (2018) also observes that for younger Taiwanese LGBTQs, the purpose of ‘coming out’ is no longer for self-development.

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<sup>9</sup> According Chiang and Wong (2016, p.1643), this term indicates to ‘Sinitic-language communities on the margins of or outside mainland China’

<sup>10</sup> As Wang et al. (2009) illustrate, this ‘filial piety’ in Sinophone cultures particularly indicates to ‘produc[ing] an heir to ensure continuity of the paternal line’ (p.285)

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Instead, they adapt it as a strategy to strengthen their intimate ties with parents.<sup>11</sup> To reiterate, while gay identity in Taiwan has its particular social meanings, gay Taiwanese men's experiences of travelling to Bangkok offers a vantage point to rethink not just whether and how tourism is associated with the establishment of a gay identity, but also what gay identity is for gay men in a non-Western context.

Also, the particularity of gay identity in Taiwan associates with specific stigma that attaches to it, which reflects the sexual politics of this non-Western social context. The stigma represents LGBTQs especially gay men, as a group of sexually active subjects who tend to be promiscuous, use entertaining drugs and engage in unprotected sex (such as bareback) so that are at the high risk of being infected with AIDS. Many studies have shown, this stigma is nothing but a complicit between governmental authority, mass media and 'public health experts'<sup>12</sup>, which can be articulated by the case of police's clampdown on 'gay home parties'.<sup>13</sup> Through analysing news discourses of gay men's home parties, Hsu, Wu and Lin's (2003) claim that Taiwanese mass media inclined to stigmatise gay men as less self-disciplined sex and drug addicts and thus potential HIV positives. This stigmatisation, as Ke (2009) and Huang and Chen (2012) critique, is a coproduction with the governmental authority while the latter (Centers for Disease Control) always highlights the number of HIV positives and the participants' homosexuality within these home parties purposely. Besides, Tsai (2015) points out that studies from 'public health experts', which emphasising correlation between gay men's casual sex, drug use and bareback (sex) base on biased empirical data, reinforce a

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<sup>11</sup> As Brainer (2018) underlines, young generation *tongzhi* in Taiwan tend to strengthen the intimate ties with their parents through 'coming out' as believing it makes 'no secret' between them, which would lead the relationship become 'closer'.

<sup>12</sup> Here, the term 'public health experts' indicates to doctors of infectious disease and scholars who publish research in AIDS prevention and produce relevant discourse of it

<sup>13</sup> One of the most classic example is the so-called 'Nong-an Street gay home party incident', which in January 2004, police cracked down on 92 gay men who were having unprotected sex and doing drugs at a private party in Taipei. The day after this incident, Center for Disease Control conspicuously declared that 28 participants of this home party are HIV positive. This declaration combined with footages and pictures in mass media of nearly naked men and piles of used condom, entertaining drugs and tissue papers, strongly constructed a stigma which associates gay men with home parties, AIDS, promiscuity and drug addiction.

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set of mutually referential relationship between promiscuity, drugs, AIDS and gay men. This relationship, then, in Huang's words (2012a), reproduces a 'sex-negative, kill-joy and anti-drug' sexual politics in Taiwan, which particularly penetrates into the subculture of gay men.

This sexual politics is embodied in different forms of popular texts. Through reviewing novels, net literatures and autobiographies, Tsai (2015) and Zhang (2014) found out a narrative pattern among HIV positive gay males, which they coincidentally underline that the 'pure/romantic love' and monogamous relationship bring them salvation from miserable lives as an infected. This pattern exemplifies how the stigmatised representation that viewing gay men as promiscuous subject and potential HIV positives leads (or even disciplines) these sexual minorities to project their sexual desires onto romantic love<sup>14</sup> instead of embodied pleasure. To reiterate, the stigma (of sex/drug addicts and thus HIV positives) that attached to gay men not only reinforces a hierarchy which dichotomises different sexual activities as good/bad (Rubin 1984), but also affects these men's preferences for and thus engagements in particular sexual practices to express they are good/bad sexual subjects (Tsai 2015, Zhang 2014, Chen and Wang 2018). Other than the stigma, romantic love and monogamous relationship as a preferred value of gay man's sexual politics also because they are crucial prerequisites for (modern) marriage/family, which is an exceptionally important social institution in Taiwan that many local gays and lesbians are eager to get into (Shieh and Tseng 2015). To sum up, in Taiwanese society, family and stigma impose different sorts of pressure on gay men regarding both whether and in which way to come out (as a 'good' sexual subject), which bring 'gay identity' particular social meaning in this Eastern-Asian context that differ from the West and thus is worthy of further exploration.

Lastly, gay Taiwanese men's travel to Bangkok is an useful context for filling in extant research gap because Taiwan is one of the most 'liberal' societies in East Asia

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<sup>14</sup> More discussions on Taiwanese gay men's preferences for romantic love see chapter 6.



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concerning the acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality, which has been complimented ‘as a beacon for Asian gays’ (Jacobs 2014). Studies have shown that the specific liberty for non-heterosexuals in Taiwan is associated with the society’s democratization after the abolition of martial law in 1987, which was followed by a set of social movements led by gender and sexual minorities (Damm 2005, Wang et al. 2009, Lee 2017). This liberty emerges in many ways. In academia, the latest Taiwan Social Change Survey (Chang 2016, Fu 2016) which was carried out by Academia Sinica in 2012 and 2015 revealed that more than half of people in Taiwan support same-sex marriage (58% and 59% respectively). In legislative term, Taiwan’s Supreme Court ‘rule[d] in favour of gay marriage’ in 2017, which signifies the island to be ‘the first place in Asian to legalise same-sex unions’ (Siu 2017). Spatially speaking, numerous forms of socio-sexual spaces such as gay bars, gay clubs and gay saunas have been booming especially in the metropolitan areas in Taiwan. The result of these spaces combining with the largest and time-honored Gay Pride Parade of Asia that is held in Taipei annually, makes Taiwan become one of the most popular destinations for Asian gays to visit.

Subsequently, if Taiwan itself is such a ‘liberal’ society in terms of attitudes towards homosexuality, the fact that gay Taiwanese men engage in sex tourism to Bangkok raises many intriguing questions. Firstly, why do these gay men travel abroad to go to socio-sexual spaces which they are able to access in their daily lives? Also, while Taiwan is already a tolerant society within which gay men’s sexual orientation has been widely accepted, are they travel abroad still in order to establish a gay identity or for other purposes? My thesis then offers an ‘updated’ perspective to explicate what do contemporary gay Taiwanese men seek for or escape from when travelling to Bangkok.

Regarding this inquiry, the metaphor ‘*hui niang jia*’ which many gay Taiwanese men used to describe their travels to Bangkok may provide a vital clue. Originally, ‘*hui niang jia*’ has its particular meaning for married women in Sinophone cultures. In the past, after getting married, Chinese women have to move to their husband’s family and play multiple roles include daughter-in-law, wife and mother, which all

takes lot of labour. Therefore, '*hui niang jia*' is a rare occasion for these women to relive the feeling of being a beloved daughter in their family of origin and hence can thoroughly relax and 'be themselves', which is a privilege they might not have in their daily lives. Thus, whilst gay Taiwanese men appropriate '*hui niang jia*' as a metaphor to describe their travels to Bangkok, it implies that this foreign city offers them a sense of family of origin to which their real hometown, Taiwan, cannot do. Thus, this might be a culturally specific context which motivates these gay men to engage in sex tourism to Bangkok repeatedly. In the next section, the chapter will further unpack how this sense of '*hui niang jia*' is produced and how does it sets the tone of the thesis.

### 1.3.3 Gay Taiwanese men's gateways to normalisations

Elaborating what the sense of '*hui niang jia*' is when they travelled to Bangkok, many participants mentioned that the city offers them both the freedom to express their sexual desires and the feeling of being included in socio-sexual spaces. Resonating with this, many other participants revealed that in their everyday lives in Taiwan, they face not only constraints when engaging in some sexual practices (detailed discussion on these practices, see chapter 3), but also exclusions from having socio-sexual interactions with others. Summarising from these narratives, the constraints and exclusions that participants have experienced in everyday lives may be associated with the normalised image(s) of gay men, which is prevalent in Taiwanese society.

The normalised image(s), as Duggan (2003) put, could be configured as a series of workings of normalisation that are shaping and mainstreaming gay's self-presentations, which she names 'homonormativity'. From her observations, Duggan claims that an assimilating/identity politics surrounding LGBTQs community has emerged in the United States from the 1990s, which attempted to reshape LGBTQs into some particularly 'respectable' lifestyles and/or images such that the sexual minorities once met the expectations of the public they might gain popular support for social inclusion and citizenship (Duggan 2003, Richardson

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2005). To further critique, Duggan argues that this assimilating/identity politic does not challenge but continues and bolsters 'dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions' and promising them 'the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency and a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (Duggan 2003, p.50).

This privatised inclination of homonormativity discloses its first intervention in geography as it redefines the 'proper' division between the realm of public and private, in both discursive and spatial sense, regarding expressing sexuality. That is, this assimilating/identity politics advocates that 'gay sex is fine in "private" but should not be "displayed" or "promoted" in public' (Duggan 2003, p.53), which shows individuals' private life is regulated and surveilled by the public. The second aspect in which homonormativity intervenes in geography lies in place-making, which is through 'the interweaving of urban governance and sexual citizenship' (Bell and Binnie 2004, p.1807). Scholars have noticed that under the regime of neoliberalism, gay spaces are commodified as a spectacle to market and regenerate neighbourhoods and cities (Bell and Binnie 2004, Binnie and Skeggs 2004). In this context, for the sake of attracting economic resources, 'the gayness' of these spaces must be expressed in a desexualised and apolitical form that 'conform to an accepted and "respectable" notion of gay identity' (Bell and Binnie 2004, p.1816, Probyn 2000, Mattson 2014), which is normally middle-classed, white and clean-cut gay men and lesbians with a 'right look' (Skeggs 1999, Skeggs et al. 2004, Puar 2002, 2006, Podmore 2013). Thus, the bodies, practices and subcultures which are not in line with the notion of 'respectable' gay identity are re-closeted to underground, back-street, namely excluded from gay neighbourhoods (Binnie and Skeggs 2004, Bell and Binnie 2004, Casey 2009a, 2009b). Moreover, the spaces where inhabit these queer unwanted bodies, practices and subcultures are also correspondingly excluded as they might undermine the respectable gay identity on the one hand while also impose the threat to gay neighbourhoods concerning attracting economic resources, which explains the process of gay gentrification from within and without. This gentrification shows 'how homonormativity was

spatially institutionalised in its ability to grant given consumers, either gay and straight, the ability to 'take place' throughout the city (Mattson 2015, p.3146).

However, many recent works have reflected the concept of homonormativity alternatively. For instance, Podmore (2013, p.264) claims that the 'analytical focus on homonormativity' should move beyond the binary of inclusion/exclusion. Also Brown (2009) suggests that instead of viewing spatial institutions of homonormativity as total and negative, we should 'reconceptualise it as ambivalent and porous, as an undetermined set of processes that simultaneously enables both resistance and capitulation (p.1500). Furthermore, Brown also indicates that homonormativity is by no means a 'uniform and all-encompassing' entity but has its geographical variations since people in different spatial and temporal contexts experienced it unevenly (Brown 2009, p.1498). He argues that current discussions on homonormativity are highly Western- and metropolitan-centred, which ignore that this concept is 'complex and multiple, without a single point of origin or form of expression' (Brown 2015, p.552). To demonstrate this argument, Brown (2015) draws on the case of gay's rural life in England and Wales before 1980s and unveils that the origin of homonormativity can be alternative economic relations which other than contemporary neoliberalism as Duggan (2003) assets.

From another case in a non-Western context, 'Pink Dot'—a LGBTQs' event in Singapore which requires its participants to be respectable, Phillip (2014) contends that its homonormative nature does not associate with neoliberal project. Instead, this homonormativity rather represents a 'specific form of activism enacted within a framework of illiberal pragmatics' in Singapore, which is compatible with the country's authoritarian regime and Confucian cultural background. Moreover, Phillip (2014) also points out that in Singapore's queer social movement, comparing to other radical activists who are normally social elites and hence have sufficient bargain chips to confront state apparatus, the organisers of Pink Dot are merely ordinary people without resources and thus can only adopt strategic cooperation with the authoritarian regime in exchange for the success of their

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campaign. The character of these organisers also contradicts to the extant Western-centered understanding which generally perceives proponents of homonormativity as a small group of people with vested interests (Duggan 2003). Additionally, in the case of Western gay expatriates in Manila, Philippines, Collins (2009) illustrates that homonormativity travels with these gay men and enables them to blend in transnational gay scenes. More importantly, these transnational lived experiences also reinvent gay expatriates' belief of homonormativity through the encounters with its Filipino counterpart that originated from the local socio-cultural context (Collins 2009).

Cases above from non-metropolitan and non-Western contexts elucidate that homonormativity is a heterogeneous entity which is composed of complex and even conflicting discourses of different normalisations in their geographical variations, whereby every individual reacts to each of them in nuanced ways. Therefore, to uncritically apply it to analyse gay lives in other spatial contexts may, as Brown (2012) critique, fall into the pitfall of producing another 'normativity'. Following this, the thesis will appropriate the concept of homonormativity as a lens to understand two particular forms of normalisation of gay identity in Taiwan. These are sexual morality and sexual desirability of gay men within a Taiwanese context and how these (normalisations) 'travel' to Bangkok with gay tourists.

When understanding the normalisations of gay men's sexual morality in Taiwan, which is shaped by social orders and hence constraints on their engagements in some (transgressive) sexual practices, it is important to be aware of a tension between groups of 'assimilationists (seeking for social inclusion) and radicalists (insisting on sexual liberation)' among LGBTs' activisms (Lee 2017, p.2). This tension become more explicit after 2013 since the latter advanced the concept of 'sexual refugees' as the theme of Taiwan LGBTQs Pride to 'defend the freedoms of everyone whose eroticism is degraded and tabooed, including incest, chem-sex, polyamory, BDSM and others' (Lee 2017, p.3). This concept drew criticisms from the group of assimilationists since they claimed these 'perverted' eroticisms may consolidate the extant stigmas that associated LGBTQs, especially gay men, with

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AIDS and promiscuity, which hindered their agenda for incorporation into the mainstream society, through issue such as marriage equality. Thus, this group of assimilationists advocated LGBTQs fellows to maintain a respectable and appropriate image to the public through constraining their sexual desires especially the ones which transgress the social orders for the sake of accessing social acceptance and hence citizenship.

This tension of 'respectable and appropriate' sexual morality to a large extent is reflected in the narratives of participants, when some of them asserted that they constrain themselves from engaging in transgressive sexual practices in their daily lives in order to sustain a positive image of being a 'respectable' (sexually moral) gay Taiwanese man. Contrastingly, some other participants revealed that they felt an obligation to engage in different kind of sexual practices including the transgressive ones since having these experiences is the premise of being a 'normal' gay man (more detail see section 3.4.2). Secondly, the normalisation of gay men in Taiwan also involves their sexual desirability particularly physical appearance. Likewise, this manifested in participants' narrations. They revealed an astonishingly homogenous notion of what kind of physical appearance in men is sexually desirable dominates gay Taiwanese men's sexual-sociality (see chapter 4). As many of them claimed, it is due to this notion that creates a hierarchical distinction among gay men (namely the 'pecking order', see chapter 3, 4 and 5), which leads to their experiences of being ignored by other gay men in socio-sexual spaces in Taiwan and hence feelings of being excluded from having socio-sexual interactions.

According to the ethnography and in-depth interviews (see chapter 2 for more more detail about research methods), the research ascertains that the normalisation of sexual morality and sexual desirability of gay men in Taiwan in part leads to a prevalent anxiety among participants as to whether they are a 'qualified' or 'normal' gay man, which in most cases refers to being respectable (sexually moral) and sexually desirable. In the following chapters, I will exemplify how this anxiety is entangled with participants' sexual practices and hence sex

tourism in Bangkok. In doing so, the thesis then illustrates that engaging in sex tourism in Bangkok in part is the gateways which participants escape from, submit to and renegotiate with the aforementioned normalisations for the sake of relieving and coping with their anxiety of being a 'normal' gay man.

### **1.4 The map of the thesis**

To tease out the entanglement between the normalisations of gay men in Taiwan and their engagements in sex tourism in Bangkok, the subsequent chapters will in sequence unpack the multiple meanings of this sex tourism for participants through closely examining the different purposes behind the sexual practices which they engage in. The theoretical framework of the thesis will not be discussed in a stand alone literature review. Instead, the main theoretical framework of the thesis, namely liminality and sexual fields and associated literature are described and critiqued within the chapters in which those theories are utilised

The following of this thesis, then, will start from Chapter 2, which introducing the design, scale, and process of the fieldwork for this research as well as the scope of empirical data collected and how I analysed them. Subsequently, the chapter will present the mixed use of research methods (namely an ethnography of following and the follow-up interviews) and my identities (include serious researcher, promiscuous peer, sexualised object and tour guide) in this research and explicate why my identity/ies was particularly advantageous for investigating participants' sexual practice, which is normally viewed as a challenging research theme regarding data collection and interpretation. However, these mixed use of research methods and my multiple identities also lead the research to reconsider two important methodological debates concerned, firstly, with whether a 'singular truth' of participants' narrations could be elicited and secondly question the appropriateness of 'a researcher's sexual participations' in the fieldwork. Through reflecting on my rationale and praxis of dealing with inconsistency or even contradictions between participants' narratives and practices as well as



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participating in sexual practices in different ways in the fieldwork, the chapter ends up with illustrating my standpoints in response to these debates.

Chapter 3 begins with unveiling that many participants far more frequently engaged in different forms of sexual practices especially the transgressive ones in Bangkok was due to the fact they switched to the 'Bangkok mode' (see 3.2) when travelling to this city. The chapter then demonstrates that why the theory of liminality which is used to explicate tourists' transgressive sexual behaviours in extant literature of sex tourism (Ryan and Hall 2001) is also useful to understand participants' switches to this particular mode. Then, in disclosing that participants did not always switch to the 'Bangkok mode' when travelling in this city, the research offers an socio-spatial/temporal perspective to re-discover the multiple scales and causes of liminality, which has yet to be discussed in current studies. Subsequently, the chapter moves on to further rethink the inadequacy in using a theory of liminality to explain gay Taiwanese men's sex tourism to Bangkok. Indeed, I argue that social orders and hierarchical distinction of daily lives were not necessarily subverted and eliminated in this type of tourism. Firstly, in underlining that some participants indeed consciously switched to the 'Bangkok mode' which originated from either their agency or social structures, the chapter shows that different discourses/normalisations concerning sexual morality, namely sets of social orders in Taiwan indeed travel with participants in Bangkok. Secondly, in revealing that participants did not always want or were able to engage in sexual practices in Bangkok due to either themselves or other men not being sexually desirable enough, the chapter indicates that the 'pecking order' among gay men, a form of hierarchical distinction, was not eliminated. These two findings foreground the need for another theoretical framework to further analyse gay Taiwanese men's intensive engagements in sexual practices when travelling in Bangkok.

Responding to this call for an alternative theoretical framework, the sexual fields theory is advanced in chapter 4 to analyse the phenomenon that gay Taiwanese men repeatedly engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok. From a Bourdieusian



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standpoint, a sexual field indicates either a physical or virtual site where with a hegemonic notion of sexual desirability, namely 'structure of desire' that valorises particular personal characteristics (i.e. physical appearance) as 'sexual capital' (more detail see section 4.2.1). In line with this concept, the chapter will show that gay Taiwanese men's engagements in this type of sex tourism are associated with their usually enhanced sexual desirability in Bangkok. This enhancement is due to firstly, for them, Bangkok is an advantageous sexual field with a specific structure of desire, namely the 'Eastern Asian Orientation', enhances their sexual desirability when they travel from Taiwan to this city and hence brought them far more opportunities for having socio-sexual interactions with other gay men. Secondly, some participants' enhance sexual desirability was also because of Bangkok is a 'democratic' sexual field with plural structures of desire that attach to different socio-sexual spaces, which their sexual capital portfolios can so at least match some of them. Whereas, as the chapter will show, this plurality of Bangkok concerning structure of desire also caused participants' sexual desirability fluctuating across different socio-sexual spaces, which exacerbated their already anxiety about lacking of this desirability. Even so, these participants continued to engage in sex tourism to Bangkok, which reveals that their travels to this city are not just for accessing a more advantageous or democratic sexual field but also for some other purposes.

Chapter 5 illustrates that one of other purposes participant aimed to achieve when travelling to Bangkok was to accrue sexual capital. By means of presenting three different mechanisms of accruing sexual capital, this chapter not only exemplifies another application of sexual field theory for analysing sex tourism, but also in turn sheds new lights on this theory through rethinking the nature of sexual capital as well as elaborating the variant forms of it, which is not yet explored. These mechanisms include the learning, enacting, and performing sexual capital; each of which are either operated by or accrue to different forms of this capital. As this chapter will elucidate, these forms of sexual capital encompass the 'learnt competency', '(resilient) self-esteem of sexual desirability' and 'conspicuous interactions', which play different roles in enhancing a gay man's sexual

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desirability and are intimately related to participants' sexual practices when engaging in sex tourism in Bangkok.

In chapter 6, the thesis shows that for participants, engaging in erotic massage is another crucial motivation for them to travel to Bangkok. Because this specific form of prostitution offered its clients power and intimacy within sex, which is many participants are unable to access in daily lives. However, according to fieldwork, these participants reported that they experienced different forms of victimisation when engaged in erotic massage in Bangkok, which contradicts the common sense and existing studies that regarding sex workers as the only and inevitable victim in prostitution. Exploring this contradiction, the chapter will appropriate sexual fields theory to, firstly, analyse dynamic power relations between participants and masseurs. Secondly, unpack interrelation among power, intimacy, and sexual capital in erotic massage, and explains that participants' engagements in this prostitution are in order to access an ephemeral feeling of they are or becoming sexually desirable. The need for this feeling, as this chapter will expound, is related to different forms of normalisations of gay man within the Taiwanese context. Moreover, through empirical cases of participants engaging in erotic massage, the chapter also rethinking the theory of sexual fields, mainly focusing on elements in which constitute a sexual field as well as the multiplicity of the forms of sexual capital.

Summarising previous empirical sections, chapter 7 firstly clarifies gay Taiwanese men's sex tourism to Bangkok is their multifold gateways to normalizations concerning gay identity. Viewing from the aspects of liminality, sexual field and prostitution, the chapter elucidates how this tourism represents these gay men's escape from and submission to the normalisations of sexual morality and sexual desirability in Taiwan. Following this, the chapter lists principle contributions of this research which mainly lie in four facets. First of all, the empirical data of this study extends current understanding of the research realm of gay tourism, sex tourism, prostitution and geographies of sexualities. Besides, theoretically, this thesis contributes to the conceptual rethink about 'liminality' and 'sexual field'.

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Thirdly, this thesis engages in the methodological debates on the possibility of 'singular truth of narratives' and appropriateness of 'researcher's sexual participation'. Lastly, this thesis articulates how such research contributes to understanding the social implications for Taiwanese society. The thesis ends up with proposing two potential topics that are worthy for further exploring. They are the interrelation among gay identity and sexual morality and sexual desirability as well as the intersection between sexual morality and sexual desirability.

# Chapter 2

## Researching Sex: Mixed Methods and Identities

### 2.1 Introduction

The research focuses on investigating the phenomenon of gay Taiwanese men engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok. This intricate phenomenon can be understood to a large degree through either observing or narratively exploring participants' relevant experiences of engaging in different sexual practices when travelling in Bangkok. However, in practice, these experiences are empirical data which is inherently difficult to document and analyse. This is because sex itself, as Crooks and Baur summarise, 'occupies an intensively private area in our lives' that most individuals 'are not comfortable discussing with others' especially with an unknown researcher (2010, p.29). However, it is also surrounded by 'myth, exaggeration, secrecy, and value judgements', which makes it difficult to interpret participants' sexual experience reliably (Crooks and Baur 2010, p.29).

To cope with these inherent difficulties in data collection and interpretation of sexual practices, I adopt mixed research methods and utilise multiple identities/positionalities to approach participants' sexual experiences and stories. This elicited two long-lasting methodological debates on the 'singular truth' of participants' narratives and the 'appropriateness of researchers' sexual participation in the fieldwork'.<sup>15</sup> These methodological debates inform my reflexivity on the research methods and identities I adopted in the fieldwork, which in turn offered itself as an intervention in these two debates respectively.

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<sup>15</sup> In this thesis, the term 'sexual participation' indicates the researcher's participation in the sexual practices when conducting fieldwork.

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Before further elucidating how the mixed research methods and my multiple identities intervene in current methodological debates, the first section of this chapter will briefly outline the research timeline and different stages of it. This section will also expound the contributions that each stage (except ethnography and in-depth interviews) make to the process and findings of the research. The second part of the chapter provides details of two principal research methods adopted in this research. The ethnographic method of 'following' and in-depth interviews will be explained, especially how they complemented each other, which enabled the research to use different forms of empirical data to get close to the 'truth'.

Moreover, this part also highlights the pitfalls of the mixed-method approach as participants produce inconsistent and even contradictory narratives about the same issue or experience on different occasions, which inform the methodological debate on the possibility of a 'singular truth' of participants' narratives. By appropriating Plummer's (1995) symbolic interactionist perspective on narrative production, this section then demonstrates that these inconsistent and contradictory sexual narratives are particularly rich empirical data to elucidate 'multiple truths' with regard to these narratives.

The third section illustrates another approach of mixing my sexual and research identities in order to facilitate the collection and interpretation of empirical data, which was embodied in my different degrees and forms of sexual participations in the fieldwork. This approach contributes to another methodological debate on the appropriateness of researchers participating in sexual activities in fieldwork. Through exemplifying different forms of researchers' sexual participation in the fieldwork and explicating my rationale for participating in them, this section underlines the importance of researchers undertaking these sexual participations during the fieldwork with respect to research ethics and practicality.

### 2.2 Outlining the fieldwork

The fieldwork for this research spanned 11 months from the end of September 2015 to the beginning of August 2016, which started from a continuous participant recruitment process that extended into the middle of the ethnography stage. Following recruitment, I conducted a pilot study in Bangkok which took place before a series of pre-ethnography interviews in Taiwan with diverse participants who were relevant to the research (see section 2.3.2). Then, a five-month ethnography of ‘following’ participants who travel to Bangkok was executed. Subsequently, follow-up interviews with the gay Taiwanese men whom I followed in Bangkok were conducted in Taiwan. The research was finally completed through coding and analysing multiple forms of empirical data, including the fieldwork diary and interview recording files collected through the aforementioned methods after they were transcribed and translated. The execution of each part of the fieldwork is explained below.

### 2.2.1 Continuous recruitment

Recruiting participants is one of the most challenging tasks in this research for three main reasons. First, the difficulty of recruitment relates to the potential participants, namely gay Taiwanese men who intend or plan to engage in sexual activities when travelling to Bangkok, being hard to identify in advance of their travel since (homo)sexuality remains a sensitive issue in Taiwanese society that most people are disinclined to talk about. To overcome this difficulty, recruitment was conducted through a closed Facebook group<sup>16</sup> I shall call ‘Thai fever’<sup>17</sup>. This closed group is a platform enabling Mandarin-speaking gay men to share information about Bangkok’s socio-sexual spaces and their personal experiences of engaging in different sexual activities in these spaces. In this sense, it is legitimate to assume that the majority of members in this Facebook group are gay men who

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<sup>16</sup> Membership is required to access to this group, which is examined by a specific administrator who created it. According to the in-depth interview with this administrator, membership is only granted to gay men, which is determined by whether the applicant’s Facebook profile looks like a gay man or he has at least ten mutual gay Facebook friends with the administrator.

<sup>17</sup> The name ‘Thai fever’ is translated from Mandarin to English. I purposely made this translation close to but slightly different from its original meaning for the sake of keeping this group anonymous.

have been or plan to go to social-sexual spaces when travelling in Bangkok. Moreover, this group also provides a table for its members to fill in their contact information<sup>18</sup> and dates of their upcoming trip to Bangkok for the sake of communicating with each other to arrange possible meets in the city. This table therefore works as a crucial means for this research to identify and recruit the usually unidentifiable potential participants whose trips to Bangkok would overlap with the ethnography of this study.

The second difficulty of recruitment difficulty has to do with timing. The table in 'Thai-fever' should have enabled me to identify potential participants I could follow during the time span of my ethnography (from December 2015 to May 2016). However, the rise of budget airlines in East Asia has led gay Taiwanese men to arrange their trips to neighbouring countries casually, which meant many of them booked their flight tickets less than a month before they travelled to Bangkok.<sup>19</sup> This extemporaneous quality made it difficult to predict and thus contact and plan the schedule of which participants to join during ethnography of a limited period. Some participants gave too short notice of their visits, others cancelled their trips or withdrew from the research as they rearranged travel. To cope with the flux in confirming research participants, the recruitment of participants in this research was carried out in a continuous way: I kept recruiting new participants till the end of the ethnography while at the same time constantly contacting the recruited participants to confirm whether they would still travel to Bangkok as scheduled and their willingness to allow me to join their trips. Following unexpected changes, I would recruit other potential participants to replace those who withdrew from the research.

A third recruitment difficulty relates to the intimate nature of exploring sexual practices and methods by following the research participants. Therefore, it was

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<sup>18</sup> This was mostly account IDs for different social media such as Facebook and LINE.

<sup>19</sup> This is because they can purchase flight tickets to Bangkok at a reasonable price at almost any time so they need not to plan the trip far in advance.

unsurprising that many potential participants resisted participating with an unfamiliar researcher. This resistance was shown in that, at first, I adopted a conventional way of contacting potential participants through Facebook Messenger by sending them a formal recruitment letter, stating my status as a doctoral candidate and providing an overview of the research. I also attached a link to my 'ResearchGate' profile to demonstrate the credibility of this research and my researcher identity. However, I received little replies to the formal research invitation, along with many rejections. This resonates with Pruitt's (2008) finding that disclosing one's identity as the researcher might be disadvantageous regarding recruiting participants. To deal with this disadvantageous but necessary identity disclosure, I adopted a two-stage 'coming-out-as-researcher' recruitment strategy. On practical terms, I initiated contact with potential participants in a casual manner by appearing as either a gay tourist or a gay man was temporarily working in Bangkok and chatted with them through Facebook Messengers.<sup>20</sup> Conversations mainly centred on exchanging our past experiences or upcoming plans of going to socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok. When rapport has been established with potential participants and with confirmation of their intentions of going to socio-sexual spaces in upcoming trips to Bangkok, I 'came out' as a researcher either before or at the point of meeting with them in person in Bangkok. I explained that I was conducting a research on gay tourism in Bangkok and then asked for their consent to participate in this study.

This strategy proved effective as most of the participants whom I met not only consented to engage in this study readily but also expressed their interest in the research topic and kept asking about my findings then, which were dramatically distinct from the distant responses I received in cyberspace. In light of some participants' narratives, their interests in this research and willingness to engage in it are closely connected to our established rapport which assured them that I am not an unknown and voyeuristic researcher whose aim is to pry into their privacy,

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<sup>20</sup> These explanations are some extent are indeed the truth since executing ethnography in Bangkok is definitely an alternative form of 'work', and the nature of this work was travelling with participants and hence I can be considered a gay tourist.



but instead a peer or friend who sincerely wish to understand their lives and thoughts. Yet it is important to point out that I was aware of the possibility that this two-stage 'coming-out-as-researcher' strategy constituted a sort of relational pressure which coerced participants to consent. To avoid potential coercion, I contacted participants every morning during their stays in Bangkok to confirm the parts of their itinerary that they felt comfortable with me as a companion. In this sense, participants reserved their autonomy of determining to what degree they want to be involved in this study while a proper space and distance between us was created, which enabled them to withdraw from this study without feeling embarrassed as they could choose whether and how to reply to my messages. A few participants indeed ceased contact with me or implicitly informed me that they preferred to go to certain socio-sexual spaces by themselves.

### **2.2.2 A pilot study of being participants**

At the end of September 2015, I conducted a pilot study in Bangkok for ten days as preparatory work for the subsequent fieldwork. To prepare for the pilot study, as a researcher who had never been to Bangkok, I read through the gay guidebook 'The gay male backpacking to Bangkok' (HUGO et al. 2014) and Facebook group 'Thai Fever' in detail. I made a list of twelve socio-sexual spaces that included gay clubs, gay saunas, erotic massage parlours and go-go boy bars which are 'must go' destinations recommended by either the guidebook or 'Thai Fever'. Following this list, I visited each of these twelve spaces at least twice during the pilot study and participated in most forms of sexual activity within them, which facilitated the execution of subsequent fieldwork that manifested itself in three aspects.

First, carrying out this pilot study increased the 'sameness' between me and participants as it transformed me from merely a gay man to a gay male tourist through undertaking this specific type of travelling (sex tourism) and indulging myself in different socio-sexual spaces and activities in Bangkok. As Lambevski (1999, p.400) claims, concerning observing sexual practice, the researcher has 'to experience it in order to understand it.' Therefore, through the experience of 'being

a participant' in the pilot study, I was able to take an 'insider' stance to reach intersubjectivity, sharing certain common experiences with participants to interpret the meanings of different incidents in subsequent fieldwork. This intersubjectivity with participants enabled me to not only better understand their usually inapprehensible feelings, emotions and perceptions with empathy but also to access their private lives and sexual stories with more ease because they had regarded me as an insider.

Second, this pilot study also made me familiar with the spatial and interpersonal features of each socio-sexual space in Bangkok, giving me the chance to experiment with different observational and notetaking skills or strategies for the subsequent ethnography as the physical environments of these spaces are different from other ordinary settings. One notable example is that most of these environments have insufficient lighting for taking ethnographic notes on paper, and environments such as go-go bars and erotic massage parlours have strict rules prohibiting their clients from using electronic devices (mobiles, video recorders or cameras) due to privacy concerns. Thus, through the pilot study of exploring different socio-sexual spaces, I was able to both perceive the potential difficulties of observing and notetaking and devise particular remedies to cope with them. For instance, in the socio-sexual spaces where crucial empirical data such as conversations between participants or their specific behaviours emerged, I usually went to a toilet cubicle later on to narrate these conversations and behaviours and record them through my mobile phone. At the end of every day, the audio recordings I made earlier would be transcribed and incorporated into the fieldwork diary.

Lastly, the execution of the pilot study also worked to assess the feasibility of conducting ethnography in the form of following participants during their trips. In practice, I followed a solo-travelling participant whom I had interviewed beforehand and another group of participants we met for the first time in Bangkok. These experiences of following participants to travel to Bangkok within distinct contexts demonstrated that either way is feasible but also presented certain issues.

These included the researcher's engagement in sexual activities and manipulations of his sexual desirability, which may significantly impact the fieldwork's execution (see section 2.4).

### 2.2.3 Making sense of participants: Data processing and analysis

As the principal methods and methodologies will be introduced in detail in the following part (see section 2.3), this section will present the scope of data used to explore the reasons for and meanings of gay Taiwanese men's engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok and how the research makes sense of this data. The principal empirical data of this research is composed of the fieldwork diary and in-depth interview recordings. The fieldwork diary was written during the ethnography, which documented different participants' personal backgrounds and past experiences, daily schedules in Bangkok, conversations with me and/or their friends and emotions and behaviours when having socio-sexual interactions with others in the total of 157 days that I followed them.<sup>21</sup>

Concerning the scope of the audio data of in-depth interview recordings, it encompasses not only what participants said that was transcribed word for word by myself, but also the notes I made to signify participants' vocal expressions or particular silences when we talked about specific topics and experiences in the interviews. This additional information is combined with the data from the fieldwork diary or transcriptions of other participants' interviews to offer a more comprehensive perspective for the research to make sense of participants' intricate and sometimes contradictory thoughts on specific events. For instance, according to a note I made on the transcription of interviews with participant Wood which marked a long silence before he claimed that his experience of having casual sex in sauna R3 was a positive breakthrough for his life, I further explored this claim when

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<sup>21</sup> Information of participants' backgrounds and experiences includes their relationship statuses, degrees of involvement in gay socio-sexual lives in their daily lives, past relationship experiences, interactions with other gay men and travelling to Bangkok.

interviewing his partner Aqua to gain more detailed insight (more detail about this case see 2.3.3).

Moreover, the principal data of the fieldwork diary and in-depth interview recordings are analysed simultaneously. To elaborate, after reading all of the fieldwork diary and transcriptions of in-depth interviews, I roughly categorised these empirical data into three major themes: liminality, sexual desirability and intimacy. Then, I reread all of the empirical data and through the use of the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA<sup>12</sup>. The data was processed using the open-coding approach, in which different codes were created and reconfigured continually in line with the aforementioned three-theme framework. Lastly, the open-coding process helped me to make sense of the interconnections between these codes, as well as the three major themes, which at the same time became important resources for me to structure my thesis chapters.

### **2.2.4 Risks and health issues in fieldwork**

The section ends by noting two categories of potential risks in conducting ethnographic fieldwork regarding sex and tourism through my personal experience, which aims to work as a reminder to other academics who intend to engage in related research topics using similar methods. Firstly, the ethnography of this research posed a significant risk to the researcher's physical health. Following participants to Bangkok is highly energy-consuming work, which not only involved the researcher's intensive physical movement between different sites within the city but also long working hours, usually from morning till midnight, since night life is an essential part of most participants' itineraries. Moreover, many participants adopted a cost-efficient attitude to make the most use of their 'investments' (time and money) in travelling to Bangkok, which resulted in a tendency to minimise time spent sleeping during the trip for the sake of going to as many places as possible. Therefore, fitting in with participants' schedules was at the expense of the researcher's breaks, which were already limited as I also wrote my fieldwork diary during this time. The risk that followed this overwork was

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exhaustion and I even fell ill twice during the fieldwork, negatively impacting the fieldwork itself as I lost not only chances to follow participants but also sensitivity to identify important empirical data when following them. To minimise this risk to physical health, I then reserved myself longer break times through being more selective in terms of following participants till midnight, usually choosing to participate in their night life only during the weekend as this was when more enriched data seemed to emerge.

Secondly, the fieldwork for this research also posed a risk to my mental health. As Bain and Nash (2006) argue, conducting research in sexualised spaces leads the researcher to a vulnerable position of being evaluated on his/her own 'sexual attraction' ceaselessly (p.103). During the ethnography, the necessity of frequenting socio-sexual spaces almost every day made me more frequently experience rejections from other gay men for having socio-sexual interactions, which caused anxieties and self-doubts about my sexual desirability and hence creating feelings of frustration. However, it is also interesting that the fieldwork itself is a sort of therapy where, through continuous observations and reflections on participants' interactions with others across different socio-sexual time-space, I found out that the evaluation of a gay man's sexual desirability is contingent and always fluctuates as it involves multiple variables acting simultaneously (section 4.3.5). This research finding discloses the pitfalls of evaluating gay men's sexual desirability solely by relying on his interactions with others, which enabled me to endure through this confidence crisis.

The impact on one's mental health from conducting fieldwork exerted two effects on this research. Firstly, it in part influenced the analytical perspective of the thesis. Specifically, it was because of this experience that I wanted to further explore the association between the socio-sexual interactions a gay man has experienced and his self-esteem of sexual desirability and thereby detected that this association might be a crucial factor motivating gay Taiwanese men to engage in sex tourism to Bangkok. Secondly, this particular personal experience also enabled me to bring relief to my participants, who were suffering from the the same confidence crisis

of losing self-esteem. In either the ethnography or interview, after sharing with these participants my research finding that most of gay men's sexual desirability is fluctuating, many of them reported that they became more confident in having socio-sexual interactions.

### **2.3 Mixing methods: A way of exploring the 'truth(s)'**

As the research centres on exploring the motivation of gay Taiwanese men engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok, it inevitably involves exploring participants' sexual lives, which is a challenging topic to research, especially in doing data collection. The challenge in collecting data on others' sexual life is related to the fact that sex is an important part of an individual's privacy. The private nature of sex, as Crooks and Baur (2010) assert, makes it hard for the researcher to either observe or inquire about participants' sexual practices since most people tend to be discreet in such matters. Furthermore, another challenge relates to the credibility of empirical data which is collected through different methods such as interviews and participant observations.

Firstly, in the case of conducting interviews, Wiederman (2002) argues that participants' self-reports of their sexual experiences are not always credible not only because their memories might be inaccurate, but also because of the 'social desirability response bias' (see also Nicholas, Durrheim and Tredoux 1994, Siegel, Aten and Roughman 1998, Tourangeau, Smith and Rasinski 1997). In Wiederman's words, this bias indicates that some participants tend to distort their experiences or attitudes toward sex for the sake of presenting themselves in particular ways. For Plummer (1995), this bias results from the social structure of a 'sexual hierarchy' (Rubin 1984), stratifying different forms of sexuality, which silences sexual stories, especially the stigmatised ones (Plummer 1995, p.26). Secondly, in the case of doing participant observations to research sexuality, it enables researcher to witness participants' sexual practices in situ to avoid their inaccurate and distorted self-report. However, like Moore notices (2002, p.121), this method indeed fails to

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capture participants' accounts that are crucial in explaining their sexual practices, which reduces the observations to the researcher's subjective interpretations.

To remedy these inherent limitations of researching sexual practices, the research adopts a mixed methods approach which combines ethnography and in-depth interviews in order to complement their respective methodological strengths while counterbalancing their weaknesses simultaneously. In this section, I will further illustrate the methodology and practicality of mixing these two methods in the fieldwork to research gay Taiwanese men's sexual practices of/when travelling in Bangkok. After this, by presenting the methodological pitfall of participants' inconsistent narratives between itself or contradict to their practices, which originates from this mixed methods approach, the section also aims to rethink the issue of 'what is the truth' of empirical data in qualitative research through the lens of Plummer's symbolic interactionist understanding of sexual narrative construction.

### **2.3.1 The ethnography of 'following'**

The ethnography of this research was conducted in Bangkok from mid-December 2015 to mid-May 2016. This period of time was chosen as it covered several festivals such as New Year, Lunar New Year and Songkran (Thai New Year), during which many theme parties for gay men are held which attracts many foreign gay male tourists to visit Bangkok, including Taiwanese. During these six months, I followed a total of 65 Taiwanese gay men who travelled to Bangkok either by themselves or with friends in a group (for demographic information about each participant see Appendix 2). Group size ranges from two to eleven gay men while the duration for which they stayed in Bangkok mostly ranges from four to eleven days. In most cases, with participants' consent, I followed them almost everywhere. This was not restricted to socio-sexual spaces but also included other cultural/leisure itinerary such as temples, department stores, night markets, restaurants and other tourist attractions from the first day they arrived in Bangkok until they returned to Taiwan. It is noteworthy that although not all of these 65 participants are directly quoted

in the thesis, each of them plays an important role in this research. Their experiences and narrations are fundamental sources that construct my perspectives and contribute to the development of many arguments in the thesis, which hence explains why the term ‘many participants’ is frequently used in the thesis.

In this research, ‘following’ as a particular way of conducting ethnography has its innovative methodological implications which manifest in the multiple meanings and practicalities of ‘following’ itself in the fieldwork. Firstly, this ‘following’ differs from conventional mobile ethnography of ‘shadowing, stalking, walk along, and participation-while-interviewing’ with research subjects (Büscher et al 2011, p.13) since the scale of following participants in this research falls across broader time and space. Specifically, since I identified these participants and added them as friends on Facebook, the ethnography of ‘following’ them started before and continued after we travelled together to Bangkok as I have consistently looked at their posts and chatted with them to exchange our experiences of travelling to or having socio-sexual interactions in Bangkok. In this regard, the spatial scale of this ethnography of ‘following’ includes more than just the physical space of Bangkok, but also cyber spaces online. Its temporal scale also goes beyond the time span during which I physically followed them in Bangkok.

Secondly, ethnography for this research is also more than a traditional ‘multi-sited’ approach (Marcus 1995) because my ‘followings’ of participants also contained their trajectories of moving in between different sites/spaces in Bangkok. While following these trajectories, I not only observed participants’ emotional shifts between before and after visiting specific socio-sexual spaces but also initiated conversations to either ask them or trigger discussions among them and their friends about their experiences of or perspectives on having socio-sexual interactions with others. This showed that there are multiple research methods, including participant observation, interviews and focus groups, assembled into this ethnography of ‘following’.



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Lastly, the multiplicity of this ethnography of ‘following’ was also embodied in its flexible stickiness, namely the various distances I kept from participants when following them to different socio-sexual spaces, which was in consideration of their privacy. For instance, I usually sat closely with participants in the go-go bars, and when we went to saunas, I tended to separate from participants to allow them to meet other people. Likewise, when went clubbing, we generally stayed together, but once other clubbers came to approach my participants, I would immediately ‘fade out’ to reserve a proper space for them to cultivate potential romantic/sexual encounters. Additionally, in the case of going to an erotic massage parlour with participants, after assisting them in choosing the masseur, I would then temporarily stop doing this ethnography of ‘following’ and waited for them at nearby café.

These multiplicities regarding scales, research methods and distances between the researcher and participants of ‘following’ confer various methodological strengths for this particular way of doing ethnography. In-depth interviews alone are insufficient, which manifested itself in data collection and interpretation. On the one hand, ‘following’ participants in Bangkok brought this research much immediate empirical data as it enabled me to observe and record participants’ behaviours, emotions and narrations in the field on a real-time basis, which is crucial information that they easily forget, distort or experience subconsciously in their self-reports in interviews (Wiederman 2002). For instance, in the follow-up interview, participant Ren originally claimed that he enjoyed going to different socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok, but when I indicated my observations on his unease in these spaces, he then either recalled or recognised such feelings, which led us to co-explore that his desire to go to these spaces was indeed the product of a specific discourse of ‘qualified gay men’ (see section 3.4.2).

The strength of the immediacy of ‘following’ enabled me to access some usually inaccessible empirical data such as participants’ feelings and interactions with masseurs, which is a ‘forbidden zone’ that researchers are incapable of observing. However, the ethnography of ‘following’ participants includes the trajectories that

they moved in between different sites allowed me to collect many semi-immediate data about this 'forbidden zone' as I always met them right after they left the parlour, after which they usually shared their 'fresh', or first-hand experiences of buying this service on the way to the next destination.

On the other hand, the ethnography of 'following' also facilitated me to develop empathy with participants, which led to numerous insightful interpretations of their sexual practices when travelling to Bangkok. This empathy is developed through three aspects. Firstly, it is from my simultaneous presence with participants in the same time-space because of following them almost everywhere. As Büscher and Urry (2009) argue, by being at specific time-space along with participants to experience what they experience, researchers gain a more profound understanding of their practices. This argument is especially illustrative of how I analyse the influence of liminality (see 3.3.1). For example, it was through being in gay clubs with participants and personally experiencing an intangible atmosphere, that was co-produced by lighting, music and pervasive drunkenness in the space, which led me to develop empathy with participants and thus understood the connection between liminality and their (transgressive) sexual practices.

Secondly, this empathy also originates from the ethnography of 'following' participants in a longitudinal manner across their entire trips to Bangkok, which provides me a contextualised lens to understand and interpret their actions and emotions in the field. For instance, through following participant Charlie and his friends to different socio-sexual spaces from the beginning of their trips in Bangkok, I thereby realised that his especially seductive style of dancing in the club FAKE is not merely the product of liminality. This dancing was the action that he adopted to demonstrate his sexual desirability as he had been ignored by other gay men in clubs and saunas that we had been to earlier. From my observation, this ignorance led to his self-doubt about his sexual desirability, which revealed from that during the trip he asked me few times if he was less attractive than others (his friends).

Thirdly, my empathy with participants also developed from understanding their life histories that accumulated from ‘following’ them in a broader sense including browsing their Facebook pages and chatting with them either online or in physical spaces, which brought me more background information when interpreting their sexual practices. In the case of participant Rabbit’s enjoyment in indiscriminate flirting with almost everyone, the ethnography of ‘following’ him illustrated that this sexual practice is more to build up his self-esteem of his sexual desirability rather than satisfying sexual desires. In our conversations, Rabbit shared several times that he used to be overweight so he still desires for external attention to sustain his self-esteem on sexual desirability. Although with these methodological strengths, the ethnography of ‘following’ as a potent method for researching sexual practices also relies on its collaboration with in-depth interview, which will be elaborated in the next part.

### **2.3.2 In-depth interview of ‘recalling’**

Other than ethnography, the analysis of this research also heavily relies on the method of in-depth interview as sexual practices are extremely private and hence cannot and is inappropriate to observe in situ. Therefore, researching sexual practices also needs participants to ‘tell their stories’ (Goulding and Shankar 2011, p.1439) and explain their thoughts and feelings ‘in their own words’ (Flowerdew and Martin 2005, p.111). Moreover, it is through intense conversations within the interviews that ‘the deeper well-springs of meaning with which attributes, attitudes and behaviors are endowed’ can be teased out (Crang and Cook 2007, p.127). The work on in-depth interviews in this research is mainly composed of two stages (with other ‘chatty’ interviews during the ethnography as mentioned above), which were conducted before and after the ethnography. A total of 62 gay Taiwanese gay men were interviewed while 42 of them are those whom I followed in Bangkok. The length of these interviews ranged from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. Most of these interviews were conducted at cafés and some of them at interviewees’ houses. The two stages of in-depth interview have their particular contributions to the research as well as entanglements with the ethnography of ‘following’ in Bangkok.

During the first stage, a total of 20 one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted in Taiwan during October and November 2015 before the five-month ethnography of 'following' in Bangkok (for demographic information about each interviewee see Appendix 1). The backgrounds of interviewees are diverse in terms of their experiences of and roles in the context of gay men traveling to Bangkok, which include both 'newbie' <sup>22</sup> and 'old-hand' <sup>23</sup> gay male tourists, the authors of guidebook 'The gay male backpacking to Bangkok' (HUGO et al. 2014), the founder of the closed Facebook group 'Thai Fever' and an overseas student who has worked as a 'Mamasan' in an erotic massage parlour. The themes of interview at this stage ranged across topics such as interviewees' expectations and previous experiences of travelling to Bangkok, especially about going to the city's socio-sexual spaces as well as their observations and reflections on why gay men (including themselves) travel to Bangkok.<sup>24</sup>

The diversity of interviewees' backgrounds brought enriched information on each topic of the interview from their respective positions, which is not just precious empirical data to analyse but also broadened my background knowledge of different socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok which contributed to the execution of ethnography of 'following' in two ways. Firstly, this knowledge contains many of the interviewees' either overlapping or divergent perspectives on particular issues which recalibrated some of my original research hypotheses and thereby redirected my attention for future observations in the ethnography of 'following'. Secondly, this knowledge also led me, a gay man who had been to Bangkok only once (which is the pilot study) at that time, to rapidly evolve into a 'Bangkok expert' who is familiar with the spatial and interpersonal features of each socio-sexual space and different tactics to 'hook up' with others. This personal image of the

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<sup>22</sup> The term 'newbie' is used, here, to describe gay men who have never been to Bangkok but plan to.

<sup>23</sup> Here, the term 'old-hand' indicates gay men who have travelled to Bangkok many times and are familiar with the city.

<sup>24</sup> I use the term 'interviewees' to distinguish them from 'participants' since some of them did not participate in the ethnography.

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'Bangkok expert' and the knowledge it represents was indeed my important bargaining chip to exchange for participants' willingness and trust to be followed in the ethnography (see section 2.4.3).

At the second stage, after the ethnography, another 42 one-on-one interviews were conducted from June to August 2016. All of the interviewees at this stage were participants who I followed in Bangkok and they were chosen to participate in these follow-up interviews since we either had more profound conversations or had gone to more socio-sexual spaces together during the ethnography, so it was expected that more insightful empirical data to the research would be generated. These follow-up interviews relate to the ethnography in two aspects. Firstly, in follow-up interviews, the interview outline for each interviewee was customised in light of their particular experiences of travelling to Bangkok that I recorded in the fieldwork diary during the ethnography of 'following' them. Secondly, through this customised interview outline, the follow-up interview to some extent served to clarify my subjective observations and assumptions about participants' emotions, intentions and considerations of undertaking particular sexual practices in the ethnography. This brings the research closer to the true and comprehensive understandings of these practices.

Moreover, these follow-up interviews also contributed to the research independently as they created a space where participants felt they could share their feelings and thoughts about sexual practices that they undertook in Bangkok, as well as their life histories and how they relate to these sexual practices. This was crucial empirical information that they had not yet told me or I was unable to observe and gather in the ethnography of 'following' them in Bangkok. As Gorman-Murray et al. (2010, p.100) argue, 'interview-based research is a spatially-situated practice' while 'narratives are always told in situ'. In this research, the spaces where follow-up interviews were held had a critical impact on participants' narratives, which firstly relates to the backdrop of it. Unlike the notion that interviews should be carried out in tranquil and uncrowded places to offer participants' privacy, particularly given the sensitivity of research subject, I found that this tranquility

and uncrowdedness actually brought participants discomfort. A few times participants asked to move from the quiet café to noisy restaurants halfway through our interview because they felt that the background noise is ideal to cover our sensitive conversations about sex from being heard by others, which brought them a sense of safety to disclose more of their private and intimate sexual experiences.

Secondly, the space of interview influences participants' narratives also because of its one-on-one basis, and some of them claimed that they felt less constrained to share their experiences of and attitude toward sexual practices in the follow-up interview than in the ethnography because they had no concern for the judgements of friends. For example, in a go-go boy bar during the ethnography of 'following' a group of gay Taiwanese men, participant Hao ordered a boy to drink with him and they seemed to be getting along well. However, in the end, Hao refused to 'take the boy out' as he claimed in front of his friends that the boy is a bit 'too chubby' which is not his 'type'. Nevertheless, when Hao recalled this experience in the one-to-one follow-up interview, he confessed that the boy indeed 'is his type' but since Du, another participant in the group, is his ex-boyfriend, he decided to refrain out of respect for Du's feelings. This case shows that Hao's narratives are more 'authentic' or closer to the truth in the follow-up interview than the ones he produced at the time.

However, many other cases in the research illustrate that the mixed methods of ethnography and in-depth interviews make participants' narratives about sex are either inconsistent in itself or contradict to their sexual practices. These inconsistencies and contradictions suggest an epistemological rethinking which this research aims to develop. That is, regarding participants' narratives, which of them is 'the truth'? What does the 'truth' mean? And is it a 'singular truth' or can it be multiple? All of these queries will be further discussed through the lens of Plummer's symbolic interactionist understanding of sexual narrative construction, explored in the next section.

### 2.3.3 Rethinking the ‘truth’ of sexual narratives

In the fieldwork, one of the most representative cases of participants producing narratives either inconsistent in itself or which contradict their sexual practices concerns participant Wood’s attitude toward casual sex and his experience of going to sauna R<sub>3</sub> in Bangkok. It was during a dinner when Wood, his friends (including his partner Aqua) and I talked about our experiences of casual sex when I met them for the first time in Bangkok. Wood expressed his disgust at this form of sexual practice as he asserted that having sex with a stranger without ‘love’ is pretty ‘bizarre’ for him. However, when we went to R<sub>3</sub> and encountered each other, Wood told me that numerous muscular and naked bodies in this space made him extremely aroused especially a Thai man who is exactly his type. The second time we met in the sauna, Wood shared that he had successfully seduced the Thai man he mentioned before, who was apparently a stranger to him, which presented a notable contradiction between his narrative and practice of having casual sex.

In the follow-up interview, when he recalled this experience, Wood regarded it as a ‘*good self-breakthrough*’ which made him recognised that having casual sex is, in his words, ‘*not a big deal*’. Nevertheless, in another follow-up interview of talking to Wood’s partner Aqua, he mentioned that Wood still regrets the experience due to worries about STIs, demonstrating Wood’s inconsistent narratives on the subject of having casual sex. In this case, it is difficult for the researcher (me) to perceive which narratives or practices are the ‘truth’ and which represent Wood’s ‘real’ attitude toward casual sex. It is impossible to further tease out his intricate thoughts of engaging in this sexual practice in the sauna, which exemplified a methodological challenge of validity when using the mixed methods of ethnography and in-depth interview to research sexual practices.

However, I argue that Plummer’s (1995) symbolic interactionist understanding of sexual narrative construction is particularly insightful in terms of this methodological challenge as it advances an alternative epistemological lens to rethink the so-called ‘truth’ of participants’ narratives. As Plummer points out,

there is no 'singular truth' of the sexual narrative; instead, each narrative is authentic and differences between them originate from that they are produced through particularly 'contingent situations (time-space and audiences), specific historical/cultural contexts of the society' and, moreover, the intentions of people who tell them (Plummer 1995, p.35). Therefore, each participant's narrative on their sexual attitude and practice, regardless of whether it is inconsistent with their other narratives or practices, has analytical value as the information it discloses is not just its meanings but also particular situations, historical/cultural contexts and its narrator's intentions which co-produce it. In this regard, participants' inconsistent narratives or the contradictions between their narratives and practices are not methodological challenges, but crucial empirical data for the research, which enriches my understandings of gay Taiwanese men's attitudes and thoughts on their sexual practices and sexual morality.

In the case of Wood, his previous narrative of '*having casual sex is bizarre*' seemed not to be a 'truth' but merely a sort of hypocritical performance of sexual morality as it apparently contradicted his sexual practice of casual sex in the sauna. However, this narrative still 'truly' revealed Wood's intention of performing himself as a respectable gay man in front of others as well as the specific historical/cultural context, namely the normalisation of sexual morality in Taiwanese society that persuades individuals to have sex only on the basis of 'love'. Furthermore, although Wood's behaviour in the sauna seemed to uncover his 'real' desire for casual sex, it is also noteworthy that my observation of his uneasy expression indicates this was a struggle between his sexual desire and beliefs in sexual morality. Therefore, both Wood's narrative and practice of casual sex in this case represented different 'truths'. Through piecing together these contradictory narratives and practices, as well as the information hiding behind them, leads the research to be closer to the 'truth' of why Wood engaged in casual sex. The 'no singular truth' approach, as will be seen in the following empirical chapters, is used as an epistemological perspective of this research to analyse participants' narratives and sexual practices.



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Moreover, to exemplify that there is no 'singular truth' of sexual narratives, Plummer also points out that the meaning of these narratives are 'never fixed but emerge out of a ceaselessly changing stream of interactions' (1995, p.23) because narratives are produced through a 'socially interactive process' that is associated with a set of 'joint actions' which different people contribute to according to the particular 'roles' they play, including story tellers, story coaxers and story consumers (ibid, p.20). This interactive feature of narrative production manifests itself in two main ways. Firstly, Plummer elucidates that the meaning of a sexual narrative is determined by not only how the 'storytellers' narrate it, which relates to a particular contingent situation and historical/cultural context, but also how this narrative is probed or brought out by 'story coaxers', as well as interpreted and made sense of by 'story consumers' (ibid, p.21). Secondly, Plummer articulates that 'stories can breed stories' (ibid, p.38), which suggests that the 'story consumers' may appropriate stories from others to reproduce their own new story. Thus, the boundary between storyteller and consumer is blurred as a continuous spiral of story production and consumption are established, which exemplifies how sexual narratives and their meanings are made in a dynamic and interactive process.

Applying this interactive understanding of the producing of sexual narratives to Wood's inconsistent narratives toward his partner Aqua and I, it can be assumed that both of these narratives are the 'truth' and the inconsistency between them originates from different relationships that Aqua and I had with Wood. Here, from a reflexive stance, I would like to further explain how Wood's narrative of the '*good self-breakthrough*' in the follow-up interview was the product of a socially interactive process between us. First of all, the production of this narrative undoubtedly related to my role as a 'story coxer' in the research, which induced Wood to tell his sexual experiences in a specific way. According to the fieldwork, I found out that my role as a 'story coxer' had notable impacts on participants' productions of their narratives not just because of how I asked questions, as Plummer (1995) asserts, but more importantly how I presented myself to participants. In line with the feminist methodological tradition of avoiding exploiting participants, Caster (2016) underlines that while the research topic is

deeply personal and so requires participants' 'high level of consensual vulnerability' (p.123), it is necessary for a researcher to correspondingly uncover their personal information such as particular life experiences within research (see also Reisman 1990). Adhering to this research ethics and recognising that sexual lives are highly private, in the follow-up interview I usually made the effort to take the lead in sharing my own sexual experiences as well as consciously expressing my neutral attitude toward every form of sexual practice, which aimed to create a safe space for participants to share their desires, experiences and thoughts on sex without fear of being judged.

However, these efforts also led participants to posit me as a proponent of sexual liberation, which affected sexual narratives they produced in the fieldwork. As Valentine (2002) reminds us, researchers must be aware when using the 'sameness' with participants in the interview because it may 'serve to close down the expression of diverse views as both [researcher and participants] seek to (re)produce the illusion of sameness' (Valentine 2002, p.123). In the case of Wood's inconsistent narratives, I reflected that the way I presented myself as a sexually 'liberal' gay man in front of participants to approach this sameness to some extent silenced Wood to share his anxiety of contracting STIs as it might make him look sexually conservative. Moreover, my self-presentation also led Wood to assert this experience of casual sex as a 'good self-breakthrough' in order to (re)produce our sameness as sexually 'liberal' gay men, which can be demonstrated from the many times in the fieldwork when he mentioned '*like "we" open-minded gays who have studied abroad*' to indicate him and me.

Furthermore, I interpret Wood's narrative on his casual sex in the sauna as his performance of sexual liberty also because of the sexual narratives from other participants. One shared '*I know you might think I'm old-fashioned, but for me those orgy parties in [sauna] R3 are just too much*', which made me notice that many participants positioned me as a proponent of sexual liberation. The case that other participants' sexual narratives affected the way I interpreted Wood's narrative of his experience of having casual sex resonates with Plummer's insightful viewpoint

that 'stories can breed stories' (Plummer 1995, p.38). In this 'story breeding' process, my role is not only a 'story consumer' who makes sense of participants' narratives. Through analysing these different sexual narratives and teasing them out as theoretical arguments, I indeed reproduced my own sexual narratives and so became a 'storyteller' to the reader of this thesis.

Moreover, sexual narratives from other participants also led me to make sense of Wood's narratives, which exemplified that the meaning of sexual narratives is indeed the product of 'joint actions' that are generated through a set of social interactions. Therefore, this research elucidates that in terms of investigating sexual practices, using the oversimplified dualism of truth/untruth through the lens of positivistic epistemology to discern and understand inconsistency among and contradiction between participants' narratives is problematic because each of these sexual narratives to some extent represents different aspects of 'truth'. In this regard, distinguishing some inconsistent narratives as false and excluding them from analysis indeed disables the research to be close to the 'truth' since these narratives contain much crucial information<sup>25</sup> that is hidden and also, they enable the researcher to think reflexively how his/her positionality affects the process of data collection, interpretation and analysis in the research. Thus, I argue that the mixed use of ethnography and in-depth interview is a potent approach to researching sexual practices. It creates occasions for participants to produce inconsistent sexual narratives that enrich the empirical data through not just offering hidden information but also initiating the researcher's reflexive thinking. This is advantageous in teasing out the complexity and ambiguity of an individual's experiences, attitudes, desires, feelings and thoughts of engaging in these sexual practices.

### **2.4 Researcher's sexual participations during fieldwork**

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<sup>25</sup> Such as the contingent situations and historical/cultural contexts in which given narratives are produced.

Echoing Plummer's assertion that sexual narratives in interview-based research are produced from socially interactive 'joint actions' between interviewees and researcher, I also noticed that another important sort of empirical data – participants' sexual practices in the ethnography – were partially generated by a set of interactions between them and me. These interactions, like Wood, who regarded me as a sexually 'liberal' peer, exemplified, were intimately related to my sexual identity which includes my sexual orientation, desires, experiences, attitudes and relationship status. As many scholars reflect, since the sexual identity of the researcher indeed has notable influences on the research process and outcome, disclosing it in reflexive accounts is necessary (Cupples 2002, Diprose et al. 2013, Kaspar and Landolt 2014, Carter 2016, Thomas and Williams 2016). However, the sexual identity of researchers is not fixed but instead expressed and posited by participants through a set of interactions that occur in the research process (Gibson-Graham 1994, Rose 1997). Hence, reflexivity includes not simply uncovering who I am but also exposing the interactions I had with participants (Cupples 2002, p.383). While the ethnography of this research to some degree was immersed in different socio-sexual spaces, the interactions that expressed and posited my sexual identity mainly regarded my sexual participations in the fieldwork. This participation has been a long-standing debate in academia, which centres on, firstly, whether it is appropriate for researchers to participate in sexual activities when conducting fieldwork and secondly, disclosing these participations in the research.

The crux of this debate lies on two aspects, namely research ethics and practicality. First of all, concerning research ethics, the academics who oppose researchers' sexual participation in the fieldwork assert that it might make them under suspicion of using power differentials to fulfil personal sexual desire (Bain and Nash 2006). Other scholars also express their ethical concern for researchers utilising their sexual rapport with participants for professional gain which indeed 'denies that intimacy as purely personal', which implies their exploitations of this rapport (Coffey 2002, p.67). Nevertheless, other scholarship views having some 'light' forms of sexual interactions with participants like flirting as a way to give

‘feedback’ on their participation in the study (Diprose et al. 2013), which represent a sort of ethics to approach equitable and non-exploitative research.

Moreover, in terms of practicality, certain scholars are in favour of researchers’ sexual participation in the fieldwork on the basis that it will lead to an epistemological gain. For instance, Kaspar and Landolt (2014, p.114) state that flirting with participants is a kind of professionalism of social scientists because it enables them to ‘create a friendly, respectful and encouraging atmosphere’ which facilitates the collection of empirical data in the fieldwork. Likewise, Dean (2009) reveals that ‘fucking’ as a way of conducting the research given that after sex, ‘men tend to speak more freely’ (p.33). Furthermore, Bolton (1995, p.149) even asserts that having sex with participants offers researchers privileged access to the ‘richer, more from the heart and more revealing’ information. Because in what he calls the ‘post-coital’ situation, participants tend to uncover their thoughts, emotions and experiences more explicitly (Bolton 1995).

Additionally, Bolton also points out the value of the researcher participating in sexual activities in fieldwork because it offers them an autoethnographic lens to better understand participants’ perspectives and feelings, which are generally difficult to articulate. In this regard, he argues that in sex research, ‘personal is also professional’ (Bolton 1995, p.162). However, another opposite opinion underlines that researchers are obligated to be celibate and asexual in the fieldwork for the sake of preserving their ‘professional self’, namely being rational and emotionless, so that they can maintain a neutral stance and properly distance themselves from their research subjects to analyse their narratives and practices objectively (Sanders 2006). To summarise, Lerum (2001) declares that many researchers’ celibacy during fieldwork is due to the fear of losing scientific credibility. This fear relates to another issue of whether to disclose researchers’ sexual participation in the research. De Craene (2017) alerts us from her own experiences that this disclosure might be at the expense of emotional labour in terms of dealing with different stigmas applied to the research(er)’s ethics and credibility.

However, my sexual participation in the ethnography closely connects to the expression and position of my sexual identity in the fieldwork (including in-depth interviews) and so that has a significant influence on the research process and findings. This in many ways affected participants' sexual practices and narratives, and I think disclosing these participations is necessary since they are a crucial dimension of the reflexivity of this research. In this section, I aim to disclose my participation in and avoidance of sexual practices during the fieldwork, but also to explain my stance and rationale of (not) participating in these interactions. Furthermore, this section also aims to present these disclosures as an intervention in the debate on the ethics and practicality of a researcher's sexual participation in the fieldwork through a more delicate way of further clarifying the nuances of these sexual participations. These nuances include not just the people (participants and non-participants) with whom the researcher has sexual interactions, but also how these sexual participations are embodied in different sorts of activities that relate to sex. Lastly, adhering to Bolton's claim that the 'personal is professional', this section will exemplify that in this research, as a researcher my sexual identity (the personal me) and research identity (the professional me) were intersected in many aspects other than just the autoethnographic accounts. Therefore, I argue that the forging of the researcher identity in part is associated with sexual identity.

### **2.4.1 Peer or 'Saint': Being a promiscuous researcher**

First of all, my sexual participation in the ethnography includes having socio-sexual interactions with people who are not participants. Logically speaking, this form of sexual participation should be appropriate regarding research ethics and practicality because it is not with participants, and so it neither exploits them nor cause bias in the researcher's analysis of them, which conforms to both research ethics and practicality. Even so, however, many academics have reflected that they still hesitate to have sexual interactions in the fieldwork due to their uncritical conformity to the positivist tradition of what it means to be a 'good researcher', namely an celibate and emotionless being (Diprose et al. 2013, Kaspar and Landolt 2016). This conformity, as my ethnographic experience unveils, relates to the

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specific stigma that originates from the typical prejudice towards sex research. Many studies reveal that in the realm of sex research, there is a phenomenon of 'courtesy stigma' (Goffman 1963), which means that the relevant stigma of the research topic spreads onto both the researchers and their research (Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 2010). For instance, in terms of the research into deviant sexual practices, researchers are easily viewed as 'a member of' their researched group (Kirby and Corzine 1982, p.4). Likewise, Hammond and Kingston also point out that the stigma on their research topic of prostitution also lead their respective research to be evaluated as not serious and even 'unworthy' of academic scholarship (2014, p.339).

Resonating with previous studies, this research experienced a double stigma due to it focusing on gay men's sex tourism in Bangkok, which led me to be generally seen as a 'promiscuous researcher' who is doing 'unserious' research. During the execution of the fieldwork, comments following the introduction of the research, such as *'I don't believe you are here [in Bangkok] for just doing research'* or *'Come on, I know it is just an excellent excuse for indulging yourself in sex, right?'*, were frequently made by some participants, which revealed not only the stigma of 'unseriousness' of this research but also their suspicions that my intention in carrying out it is in order to fulfil my sexual desires. This suspicion connects to another stigma that many participants viewed me as promiscuous or at least as someone who has had abundant experiences in different forms of sexual activities, especially transgressive ones. For example, some participants joked that *'You [the researcher] have been to orgy parties every week, so you must be a "master of gangbang" now.'* This stigma of being promiscuous manifested itself in not only participants' conversations but also their sexual invitations during fieldwork. A representative case occurred after I declined to have sex with a participant during an interview prior to the ethnography, to which he responded *'Although you seem to be respectable and behave well, I know you are slutty essentially.'* He also told me *'A normal guy won't choose this topic for his thesis.'*



These incidents of experiencing the stigma regarding my researcher identity of 'unseriousness' and having a sexual identity of being 'promiscuous' strengthened my commitment to be (or, in a more reflexive sense, to perform as) a 'good researcher' who abstains from undertaking sexual practices in the fieldwork. During the first month I undertook ethnography, I posited myself as a distant observer who avoided participating in any sexual interactions with anyone when visiting socio-sexual spaces with participants for two reasons. Firstly, in relation to my concerns surrounding professionalism, I chose this particular position of distant observer to achieve the seriousness of doing ethnography because I believed that it would not just make me concentrate on observing participants but also minimise my influence on their sexual practices, reducing the bias in my participant observations. Secondly, for personal considerations, I adopted the position of a distant observer due to the need to maintain an image of a respectable gay man, which worked to keep myself from being viewed as 'promiscuous', a state that then I regarded as stigmatised. Thus, this particular positioning in the first month of fieldwork illustrated how I forged my sexual identity as an asexual being to establish my researcher identity as a professional.

However, in practice, this research position indeed caused many difficulties with either collecting or interpreting empirical data in the ethnography following the first month, which mainly manifested itself in three aspects. Firstly, my role of distant observer made participants uneasy and interrupted their sexual practices. No matter what, I still coexisted with participants and since I did nothing but just observed, for them a sense of being under surveillance was engendered simultaneously. For instance, a participant revealed after we went clubbing together that *'Whenever you [the researcher] stopped drinking and just stood there, I supposed that you were doing your business. This made me a bit uneasy about keeping on flirting with others knowing that it was being recorded.'*

Secondly, the position of distant observer, although expressing my seriousness as a researcher, it also restricted participants from doing particular sexual practices and telling me about their experiences of engaging in these practices. For example,



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many times in the orgy party at R3 sauna, different participants expressed their concerns at whether I would join the group sex. According to a participant, these concerns were connected with his willingness to engage in the orgy or to tell me more about his past experiences of sex: *'I'm afraid that you will see me as a "dirty" guy. I mean, even though you seem to be open-minded but at the same time you have never participated in any of this (orgy), just like a saint.'* This explanation disclosed that in the fieldwork, the researcher and participants cared about how they evaluated themselves and were evaluated by each other, which thereby influenced their (sexual) practices.

Thirdly, being a distant observer also led participants to doubt my ability to understand their sexual practices accurately as they supposed that I might be an 'outsider' who lacks relevant experiences. As the study of Bain and Nash reveals, their lack of sexual involvement in the fieldwork resulted in the diminishment of their 'credibility as researchers in the eyes of informants' (Bain and Nash 2006, p.104), which uncovers that in some cases a researcher's professionalism (research identity) is suspected because their sexual identity (and desire) is absent from the research.

These difficulties in collecting and interpreting empirical data allowed me to critically rethink the disconnections and conflicts between my behaviours and sexual identities in the fieldwork. Although I identify myself as a sexual liberalist (sexual identity) who rejects any oppression and hierarchy on different forms of sexuality including sexual orientations, practices, and erotic preferences. Meanwhile, I also uncritically accepted 'negative' comments on this research (unserious) and myself (promiscuous), which led to adopting the position as a distant observer or a 'good researcher' in a positivist sense who avoids engaging in any sexual participation in the fieldwork. This behavioural avoidance to some extent disconnects from and conflict to the sexual identity with which I self-identify, at least in participants' eyes and affected their sexual practices in the fieldwork. Dean's work (2009) on bareback sex offers an insight into how a researcher manages the interrelation between his sexual identity and behaviours.

In the book *Unlimited Intimacy*, Dean discloses that he personally engaged in this controversial form of sex, but he does not identify himself as a barebacker. This unidentification, as Dean asserts, does not suggest that he denies this sexual identity but instead, conveying his advocacy of an 'impersonal ethics alterity' (Dean 2009, p.25). In Dean's words, this research ethics, he aims for elaborating 'something other than a politics of identification' (Dean 2009, p.24), that is, an alternative which the researcher can care about the research subject without identifying him/herself in it. Through this strategic positionality of engaging in given sexual behaviours while at the same time disconnecting with the sexual identity that these behaviours imply, Dean argues that the 'ethics of alterity' would provide readers (of his book) a suspension of judgement on arguments he made in the book, which leads to more space for thinking freely (Dean 2009, p.28).

However, in this research, the 'ethics of alterity' seems difficult to achieve given that participants' engagements in socio-sexual interactions in the fieldwork closely associated with my sexual identity, which is necessary to illustrate through my sexual behaviours. After unpacking the interrelations among my sexual identity, behaviours and participants' sexual practices, I transformed myself from a distant observer into an 'involved participant' who participated in different forms of socio-sexual interactions with non-participants when I followed my participants in the subsequent ethnography, which was for two principal reasons. Firstly, it was for an ethical reason to reconcile my personal (sexual identity) and professional self (researcher identity). That is to say, my intellectual belief and research aims are based on a queer epistemology on sexuality, which interrogate any forms of normalisations of sexualities and further deconstruct the structure of the 'sexual hierarchy' that reproduces them. Thus, through personally participating in different sexual practices with non-participants in the fieldwork and disclosing these experiences either to participants and in the thesis with ease, I aim to stress to my participants and/or readers that every sexuality, such as the state of being 'promiscuous', is worthy of equal respect. Through this praxis of queer epistemology, I thereby reconcile my personal self to the professional one in this sex research to demonstrate a commitment to research ethics.

Secondly, I transformed my research position into ‘involved participant’ partly due to practical concerns for facilitating empirical data collection and interpretation. Concerning collecting data, on the one hand, through participating rather than merely observing sexual interactions in the socio-sexual spaces when following participants, the influence I exerted on their sexual practices due to my sense of presence for them were diminished. As many participants revealed, they sometimes even overlooked the fact that I was there with them in the socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok because of my participations in most forms of socio-sexual interaction that they did, so they have never felt they were being researched and so could behave in the way they usually did. On the other hand, my sexual participation in the fieldwork also enhanced my role as an ‘insider’ for participants, so many of them posited me as a ‘promiscuous peer’ rather than a ‘respectable researcher’. This particular positionality encouraged participants to not only participate in sexual practices for which they desired in the ethnography, but also to share these experiences in the interviews. One participant stated *‘I feel safe to share these [his sexual stories] with you, since I know you did it as well. Yeah, we are equally dirty, so nothing needs to be hidden from you.’* According to this statement, labels of ‘promiscuous peer’ that originated from my sexual participation in the fieldwork are useful tools to collect empirical data, especially about private and sensitive experiences since they created a sense of security for participants to carry out sexual practices or share their sexual experiences and thoughts without worrying that they will be judged as sexually immoral. This case showed how a researcher’s sexual identity (promiscuous) can be a strength in his researcher identity, which illustrates that the researcher’s personal and professional selves are joined, and also further demonstrates that their intersection is advantageous in the execution of fieldwork.

Moreover, being an ‘involved participant’ also advanced my interpretation of the empirical data through an intersubjective lens to understand participants’ sexual practices. For instance, it is my personal experiences of being a client in erotic massage that enabled me to sense the feelings of anxiety, helplessness and being

victimised by masseurs during this sexual service, which many participants mentioned (see Chapter 6). This sounds not only beyond common sense but also hard to sympathise with without personally being involved in this form of sexual service. This case also elucidates another intersection between my personal and professional selves in the fieldwork, in which the researcher identity to some extent also forges my sexual identity (Thomas and Williams 2016). To be specific, for the sake of strengthening my research professionalism (researcher identity), which includes putting myself in the participants' position, I participated in many forms of sexual practices, which forged a new sexual identity for me as a 'sexually knowledgeable' gay man that even extended to realm outside of the research. To summarise, my sexual participation with non-participants suggested that a researcher's personal and professional selves are not only joined but also construct each other reciprocally.

### 2.4.2 Researcher's performances of sexual desirability

Regarding the current debate on the appropriateness of researchers' sexual participation in the fieldwork, other than considering the people involved in these sexual practices, this section aims to further intervene in this debate through extending the meaning of sexual participation from sexual interactions to a researcher's sexual desirability and his/her performances of it.<sup>26</sup> As O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor write, 'the researcher not only sees, but is seen by the research subject' so that presenting the 'sexual and embodied self' is an indispensable task in the process of conducting social research (O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 2010, p.46). Following this, many studies claim the importance of considering the researcher's desiring body as it exerts notable impacts on the research (Diprose et al. 2013, Kaspar and Landolt 2016). While Oretton (2004 see Bain and Nash 2006) views a researcher's body as an effective tool to collect data, Walby (2010) asserts that it causes trouble to the research by

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<sup>26</sup> In this chapter, the term 'sexual desirability' mainly indicates an individual's physical appearance which includes their looks and body.

bringing unwanted sexual encounters between the researcher and participants. From my fieldwork experiences, this section will not just explore the pros and cons of a researcher's sexual desirability when he/she undertakes research. Moreover, it will further elucidate that sexual desirability is not 'being' there statically, but instead is 'performed' by the researcher through either showing or concealing it (see 5.4 for a discussion of the performance of sexual desirability), which make it exert an impact on participants' relationships with the researcher at different stages of the fieldwork and thus influences the research findings. Therefore, I argue that the performance of sexual desirability is an alternative form of the researcher's sexual participation in the fieldwork, which must be included in the reflexive account of the research. I will further reflect on both the ethics and practicality involved in this particular form of sexual participation in the fieldwork through disclosing my performances of sexual desirability as well as the rationale behind them.

In the fieldwork, the impact of my (performances of) sexual desirability on the research emerged from two stages: participant recruitment and the ethnography of 'following'. First of all, this research mainly relies on Facebook for recruiting participants. At the beginning of the recruitment process, I kept the profile picture on my Facebook account as it usually is, a photo of my silhouette, since I view this social media platform as my private space in which I can choose whether to expose my face. However, my profile picture relates to difficulties in recruitment such as the low ratio of responses to my messages as well as some potential participants requesting me to send them more pictures of my face and body otherwise they would be unwilling to continue our conversations. To cope with these silences and requests from potential participants, one of the tactics I adopted is replacing my profile picture on Facebook with a 'face-on' one. After this replacement, there followed a notable transformation of recruitment. Many more potential participants replied to my messages and revealed their willingness to either be interviewed or allowed me to follow them in Bangkok, which even included those who had been silent or refused continue the conversation before. This transformation to some extent was related to potential participants sexualising me

and my physical appearance. I received questions such as '*Are you single?*', '*Do you have some other semi-naked pics?*' and '*Should we go for a movie before that [interview or travel to Bangkok]?*' in conversations on Facebook. These instances not only resonated with O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor's argument (2010) that researchers' sexual desirability (sexual and embodied self) is inevitably involved in the research process, but also further demonstrated that my strategical performance of it through presenting 'face-on' photos of mine via Facebook was indeed beneficial to the research, in terms of recruiting participants.

However, it is equally noteworthy that a researcher's sexual desirability also brings limitations to participant recruitment. During the pre-ethnography interviews, I twice encountered interviewees cancelling our scheduled interviews right after we met as they claimed that they had '*something urgent to deal with*', which I assumed was due to my physical appearance not meeting their expectations. Another limitation my sexual desirability brought to the recruitment of participants was the absence of so-called 'mainstream' gay men, namely those who are commonly viewed as sexually desirable and have extensive gay social networks. It was because this sort of 'mainstream' gay men were less likely to project their sexual desires onto me, and also they were more likely to be able to go to social-sexual spaces in Bangkok without my guidance because they generally have similar spatial experiences in Taiwan or have friends to accompany them. Conversely, many of the participants in this research are 'marginal' gay men whose physical appearances do not fit the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan or those who have fewer social connections and sexual experiences with other gay men. Therefore, this group of gay men are more likely to either evaluate my physical appearance as sexually desirable or need a guide like me to help them to access different forms of socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok, which thereby led them to participate in this research. This imbalance regarding participants' sexual desirability and gay social networks in the recruitment, which partially related to my sexual desirability, inevitably sets a hard tone and pessimistic account of this research in interpreting gay men's socio-sexual lives since considerable empirical

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data came from 'marginal' gay men and their experiences of being excluded from the culture of lookism among gay men.

Likewise, at another stage of fieldwork, the ethnography of 'following', my (performances of) sexual desirability also impacted the research. From the experience of recruiting participants, I was aware that a researcher's physical appearance is inevitably involved in the execution of fieldwork so since then I have pushed myself to make efforts to elevating my sexual desirability such as through a strict exercise regime and diet to keep my body in shape, as well as using perfume, hair wax and dressing up almost everyday during the ethnography. This performance of sexual desirability did facilitate my execution of ethnography in two aspects. Firstly, it led many participants to regard me as their peer so that they were more willing to allow a stranger like me to follow their travels in Bangkok entirely, which largely increased the completeness of the ethnography of following them.<sup>27</sup> One participant said *'You know what, we [he and his friends] are actually very picky in not permitting everyone to join our group, especially those ugly ones. And you are qualified since you look not bad.'*

Secondly, the performance of showing sexual desirability facilitated me to follow participants' trips in Bangkok entirely because some of them sexualised me as a desirable object and viewed their participation in the research as an opportunity for developing either sexual or affectionate rapport with me, since we would spend considerable time to get along together. This research tactic of sexualising myself through sexual desirability performance leads this research to intervene in the debate on the appropriateness of researchers building sexual rapport with their participants. This especially relates to the research ethics aspect since my sexual desirability performances might be suspicious in terms of exploiting sexual rapport with participants for personal and academic gain.

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<sup>27</sup> In some cases, I could not follow participants entirely in Bangkok as some of them either occasionally or permanently lost touch with me for unknown reasons, which fragmented the empirical data of following them and led some of their sexual practices to be mysterious and hence difficult to analyse.



To respond to this suspicion of violating research ethics, I would like to disclose my stance toward researchers building sexual rapport with their participants and illustrate my rationale behind this stance, which includes a rethink of the common argument that views this rapport as a form of sexual exploitation. First of all, my stance in this research is to avoid building sexual rapport with participants. However, what must be addressed is that this stance is based on practical considerations rather than research ethics since I argue that whether a researcher's sexual rapport with participants constitutes sexual exploitation requires a more delicate discussion. To be specific, it is worth reflecting on the fact that researchers developing intimacy, such as friendship or quasi-kinship, with their participants is normally seen as an appropriate way to collect data. But, in contrast, when this intimacy is in the form of sexual rapport, the researcher will usually be suspected of sexually exploiting participants. These contrasting judgements on different forms of rapport between researchers and participants imply a hierarchy of intimacy in academia, which indiscriminately depreciates the ones that imply sex. I argue that, ethically speaking, whether a given intimate relationship between the researcher and participants constitutes exploitation should be examined in a more comprehensive way, which considers the form it takes and the researcher's determination to maintain the relationship after the fieldwork. In the case of a researcher becoming indifferent to participants once he/she finishes the fieldwork, this is an 'exploitation' of participants. Conversely, when a researcher makes an effort to maintain intimacy with participants, initiated from sexual rapport in the fieldwork, this should not be viewed as exploitative.

According to my perspective on research ethics, I chose not to build sexual rapport with participants in the fieldwork because of a practical concern that this rapport might bring data collection difficulties. That is to say, it was due to my performance of sexual desirability that aroused some participants' desires to build sexual or affectionate rapport with me. These desires to some extent caused them to refrain from not only undertaking the sexual practices that they normally do when traveling in Bangkok but also from disclosing their previous experiences of sex for the sake of presenting a 'respectable' image to me. One representative case is



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participant Egg who confessed the following: *'Since you [the researcher] are my type and I wanted to hook up with you, of course I have to restrain my desires from doing those 'dirty' things to show you that I'm a decent guy. After all, who wants to date a playboy, right?'* This confession accounts for Egg's dramatic transformation in sexual participation. At first, he tended to stay beside me in the sauna and club without interacting with other patrons and avoiding engaging in erotic massage parlours, asserting that he was very shy. However, after I re-affirmed my stance of not building any sexual or affectionate rapports with participants, Egg started to not only share many of his sexual stories in the past that are generally recognised as 'transgressive', but also started his sexual adventures in Bangkok, mainly by flirting or 'hooking up' with strangers at different socio-sexual spaces, which is his ordinary practice while travelling abroad.

This case illustrates that a researcher's (performance of showing) sexual desirability also causes difficulties in the execution of the ethnography as it might block him/her to access many crucial empirical data of the research. Therefore, in the subsequent fieldwork, I performed my sexual desirability in a flexible way, which meant presenting it as sexually desirable but meanwhile, de-sexualised. To be specific, I still made an effort to maintain the desirability of my physical appearance, but at the same time performed it in a restrained manner through moderating my dress and body language, such as through wearing clothes without overexposing my body and avoiding ambiguous body contact with participants to prevent myself from being sexualised by them, as suggested by academics (see Sanders 2008 and Walby 2010). Additionally, in casual conversations with participants, I explicitly conveyed my stance of not having sex with them. Also, once I perceived that participants led our conversations in a sexually seductive way, I mostly redirected them to another non-sexual topic to implicitly express that I am sexually unavailable to them.

Lastly, in some cases, the performance of concealing my sexual desirability was necessary to execute the ethnography considering both research ethics and practicality. This awareness originated from an experience of going to the sauna in

the pilot study with participant Joe, with whom I used to have a good relationship when he guided me to many socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok. However, this relationship changed after Joe asked me how many guys I had 'hooked up' with in Sauna Mania. My answer was followed by him becoming extremely angry and using terms such as 'you dirty slut' and 'whore' to yell at me. Thereafter, Joe refused to let me follow him in Bangkok and also stopped replying to my messages. Joe's anger was mysterious and one possible reason is that he had feelings for me, but this seems very unlikely because our sexual roles overlap and he prefers muscular men, a category I do not fall into. However, from the ethnography, I observed there was a tendency for participants to evaluate their own sexual desirability through comparing with friends about the number of sexual encounters they had in socio-sexual spaces (see section 5.4.3). These comparisons usually caused participants to feel anxious and frustrated, which is illustrated by Joe's anger towards me. Thus, from this experience, I learned to be cautious about performing my sexual desirability while on some occasions even concealing it. This concealment is due to an ethical concern of avoiding causing harm to participants' self-esteem relating to sexual desirability, while also considering the practicality of maintaining a good relationship, both of which are important for the execution of the ethnography.

### **2.4.3 The dilemma of being a 'tour guide'**

Lastly, I also argue that the meaning of researchers' sexual participation in the fieldwork includes not just their performances of sexual desirability but also the sexual information in which they offer to participants. As this research exemplified, during the ethnography of 'following' I was not only a researcher but also played the role of a 'tour guide' whom accompanied participants to different places, provided them overviews on each socio-sexual place and offered some tactics for initiating interactions and flirtations with others, from my own experiences and those of other 'old hand' participants. Since these overviews and tactics usually had profound impacts on some participants' subsequent sexual practices here, I indeed 'participated' in their sexual practices in a disembodied way, namely a way which without having sex with them directly. Thus, I will now reflect upon the

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appropriateness of a researcher participating in participants' sexual practices in a disembodied way through the aspects of research ethics and practicality.

Firstly, regarding research ethics, being a 'tour guide' for participants during the ethnography achieved a reciprocity between us as this guidance was adopted to express my appreciation for their participation in this research. This demonstrated my commitment to executing a non-exploitative research. Secondly, for practical concerns, this disembodied sexual participation also facilitated me to recruit and follow participants because many of them were attracted to participate in this research in exchange for a free 'tour guide'.

However, this role of 'tour guide' also caused difficulties in collecting data due to its authoritative nature. Most the participants perceived me as an 'Bangkok expert' in all kind of sex-related spaces, activities and interactions. This perception led them to indiscriminatingly and blindly approve of all of the sexual narratives I gave, which to a large extent instructed their sexual practices in and thoughts of these spaces. For example, many participants liked to consult me about my personal experiences of and the overview on given socio-sexual spaces before they went to that space. It is notable that, in follow-up interviews, these participants' narratives of their experiences and thoughts on the given social-sexual spaces were extraordinarily overlapping with the ones I gave to them. To sum up, it was my sexual narratives that reproduced participants' sexual narratives, which resonates with the argument 'stories can breed stories' advanced by Plummer (1995, p.38) and exemplified that being a 'tour guide' made my role in this research more than just coxer or consumer, but also co-producer of participants' sexual stories (Plummer 1995, p.20).

Also, many participants in the ethnography tended to asked my advice for their itinerary, especially the sex-related one. Unsurprisingly, the advice I gave mostly ended up being their final decisions since they believed that I am an expert of this realm, which suggests that my role as a 'tour guide' also determined participants' sexual practices of visiting which socio-sexual spaces when they travelled in

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Bangkok. These cases demonstrated that my sexual narratives (including the overview and advice regarding socio-sexual spaces) inevitably influenced or even determined participants' sexual narratives as well as sexual practices, which all are crucial empirical data that this research aims to analyse. Thus, being a 'tour guide' and the authority behind it to some extent conferred on me power to reproduce this crucial data, which undermined their credibility. However, since this particular role in the ethnography is also my commitment to participants, this posed a dilemma between research ethics and practicality.

When confronting this dilemma, I chose to adhere to the role of 'tour guide' in the ethnography and minimised the damage it caused to the credibility of empirical data in two ways. Firstly, I made a great effort to discipline myself on my stance as a friend of participants rather than of a researcher when providing them advice on which socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok would match with their different purposes, such as for fulfilling sexual desires, constructing self-esteem or experiencing intimacy. On the other hand, I also kept recording the influences that this role of 'tour guide' exercised on participants' sexual narratives and practices and then disclosed them in the reflexive accounts. Additionally, concerning these alternative forms of researchers' sexual participation, they unveil that both of my performances of sexual desirability as a peer or desirable object and provision of sexual information as a 'tour guide' had critical influences on the execution of fieldwork. This indicates that, as a researcher, my sexual identity and research identity were inseparable.

# Chapter 3

## Travelling in order to enter into liminality

### 3.1 Introduction

During interview, many participants reflected that they did not mainly travel to Bangkok for sexual encounters. However, participants also revealed that when travelling to this city, they in fact far more frequently engaged in different forms of sexual practices, especially transgressive ones. Here, the term transgressive sexual practices indicates specific forms of sexual activities, with specific kinds of people in specific spaces, which ‘transgress’<sup>28</sup> the social orders of sexual morality in Taiwan and in which participants have not engaged and would not dare to engage in their daily lives.<sup>29</sup> As many participants clarified, their frequent engagements in these transgressive sexual practices in Bangkok resulted from the fact that travelling to this city causes them to switch to a particular state, namely ‘Bangkok mode’ (see 3.2.2).

These clarifications underline an intimate nexus between tourism and tourists’ engagements in transgressive sexual practices, which has been explored in a large body of literature that applies the theory of liminality to expound how the specific time-space of travelling abroad leads tourists to subvert the social order of their daily lives and then engage in transgressive sexual practices (Ryan and Hall 2001, Selänniemi 2003, Bandyopadhyay and Nascimento 2010, Freidus and Romero-Daza 2009, Chow-White 2006). Using the lens of liminality to analyse the phenomenon

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<sup>28</sup> From participants’ narrations, I found out that although they shared a roughly similar understanding of sexual morality, there are still nuances of this morality. Thus, in this research, transgressive sexual practices indicate those that transgress the social norm each participant believes and so would not engage in their daily lives.

<sup>29</sup> Hereafter, this it is not indicated specifically, the term ‘social order’ refers to the social order of sexual morality in Taiwan.

of participants switching to 'Bangkok mode', this chapter will demonstrate that this theory illustrates why gay Taiwanese men repeatedly engage in sex tourism to Bangkok. However, when further exploring participants' switches to 'Bangkok mode', the research also finds that there are limitations to applying the theory of liminality to understanding their engagements in transgressive sexual practices and hence sex tourism, which is mainly manifested in three aspects.

Before discussing these limitations, the chapter will briefly introduce the theory of liminality, clarify its interventions in understanding tourists' transgressive sexual practices and exemplify why it is an illustrative theoretical framework to articulate 'Bangkok mode'. The chapter then moves on to clarifying the first limitation in applying the concept of liminality to sex tourism which recognises that participants did not always switch to 'Bangkok mode' during the entire time-space of travelling to Bangkok. Therefore, this section provides an elaborate rethinking of the scales of liminality, further clarifying intricate causes that generate liminality. Secondly, while current studies tend to regard tourists as being unconsciously immersed to liminality, the research alternatively finds that many participants indeed consciously switched to 'Bangkok mode', whether originating from their agency or social structure(s), which exposes the second limitation of the theory of liminality. Lastly, through discussing that two fundamental features of liminality, social order subversion and hierarchical distinction elimination, did not occur in participants' experiences of engaging in transgressive sexual practices, this chapter demonstrates that in many cases participants' did not switch to 'Bangkok mode' because of liminality. Instead, I will explain that the sexual desirability of the self and others is another crucial factor determining participants' willingness and ability to switch to 'Bangkok mode' and hence leading to sexual transgression.

### **3.2 Liminality, 'Bangkok mode' and sexual transgression**

As stated in this chapter's introduction, current research applies the concept of liminality to explain tourists' engagement in sex tourism. To elaborate this theoretical application, this section aims firstly to introduce the origin of this

### Chapter 3 - Liminality

theory and its specific features. The section will then illustrate how these features of liminality are associated with tourism and explain why this concept is especially insightful in analysing engagements in sex tourism. We will use the concept of liminality to explain gay Taiwanese men's particular state of intensively engaging in different kinds of sexual practice when travelling to Bangkok, namely 'Bangkok mode' (see 3.2.2).

The theory of liminality was firstly proposed by Turner (1967), extended from the conceptualisation of the 'rite of passage' (van Gennep 1960). This rite of passage is normally composed of three phases and starts from the ritual subjects, who can be either a given individual or group, detaching from the previous social status and order they belong to. These ritual subjects will then reincorporate into their society after entering into an ambiguous state of liminality that goes beyond any socio-cultural constraints, which leads them to experience a transition. This involves, in Turner's words, 'a whole series of changes in the nature of the cultural and ecological activities to be undertaken' (1982, p.25). To further clarify this period of liminality, Pritchard and Morgan (2006) highlight its transitory, betwixt nature while Preston-Whyte (2004) indicates that liminality is a specific space and time span that offers ritual subjects 'freedom and an escape from the daily grind of social responsibilities' (p.350). Thus, as Turner argues, 'everything may happen' and be forgiven in this time-space (Turner 1974, p.13).

Based on these fundamental understandings of liminality, Shield (1990) associates this theory with the concept of carnivalesque. Carnivalesque is developed by Bakhtin (1984) which he dates from the carnival events in medieval Europe that normally occurred in the bounded space of the marketplace during a specific period of the festival. Bakhtin claims that, during the carnival, all 'norms and prohibitions of usual life' are suspended so that an 'atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity' forms (Bakhtin 1984, p.15-6). This atmosphere then leads to an 'upside down' (Walton 2007, p.9) or 'topsy-turvy' (Weichselbaumer 2012, p.1221) world that allows behaviours that transgress ordinary social order to dominate and 'become part of popular praxis' (Webb 2005, p.121). This

carnavalesque situation is akin to the period of liminality that Turner (1974) indicates in two aspects. Firstly, both these concepts indicate that, in the specific time-space, most elements of the existing social order are suspended or even subverted. Secondly, the similarity between liminal and carnivalesque also manifests in the interpersonal hierarchy elimination. As Bakhtin emphasises, during the carnival, 'all hierarchic distinctions and barriers' (Bakhtin 1984, p.10) among people are eliminated so that everyone is considered equal. Therefore, Bakhtin argues that an individual in the carnival situation 'feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of people's mass body' (ibid, p.255). This feature is also fundamental to Turner's notion of liminality in which he claims individuals' social statuses are temporarily stripped so that a feeling of equality is cultivated and 'an intensive bonding "communitas" is experienced' (Urry 2002, p.11). Through evaluating current studies of sex tourism, this thesis discerns that the concept of liminality has been widely used due to features closely associated with the nature of tourism which mainly manifest themselves in the three aspects outlined below.

#### **3.2.1 Interweaving liminality into sex tourism**

As argued previously, liminality and tourism have many features in common. First of all, both are initiated from spatial displacement. As Pritchard and Morgan (2006) claim, an individual's liminal experiences usually involve a 'metaphorical crossing of some imagined spatial or temporal threshold' (p.764) that is facilitated through 'a physical movement in space' (Jaimangal-Jones et al. 2010, p.261). Similarly, it is also the spatial displacement that leads tourists to engage in transgressive sexual practices in foreign countries, since travelling abroad provides them with a particular space-time that is detached from their everyday lives.

For instance, in his work on cross-bordered prostitution, Sacramento (2011) highlights the importance of the borderline, which signifies a symbolic spatial threshold between the ordered daily routine and an unstructured world. Therefore, when clients of prostitution physically cross borders and travel to a foreign country,



### Chapter 3 - Liminality

they feel like they 'enter a liminal space-time' where daily social order is suspended or subverted (Sacramento 2011, p.372). The spatial displacement of crossing the borderline to leave everyday lives behind leads married or partnered clients of prostitution to perceive themselves as becoming single and thereby enables them to legitimise their engagements in this sexual transaction, which is normally seen as a transgressive sexual practice, especially for people who are partnered. However, it is noteworthy that tourists' engagements in prostitution in foreign countries does not mean that the everyday social order of fidelity of marriage is subverted in this time-space of travelling abroad, since these sexual transgressions (buying sex) originate from tourists' ephemeral 'imagined identity' of being single. This identity demonstrates that the social order of fidelity in the relationship (or marriage) still constrains these tourists, which shows that tourism as a time-space of liminality is restricted. This argument will be further exemplified later in this chapter through gay Taiwanese men's experiences of travelling to Bangkok (see 3.4.1).

Next, 'place myth' is the second shared feature between liminality and tourism that leads tourists to engage in sexual practices which transgress the social order of their everyday lives when they travel abroad. In analysing tourists' transgressive behaviours (including sex) during holidays in Brighton, Shield (1990) asserts that these behaviours are generated from the liminality, which is intimately related to its place myth as a liminal and pleasurable town. According to Shield's viewpoint, the place myth is composed of a constellation of different cultural representations of a specific place that accumulate as an acknowledged notion which heavily influences tourists' behaviours and interactions with others, including those transgressive ones at these conceptually 'territorialised sites' (Shield 1990. p.40). This 'place-myth centered' perspective of liminality in tourism is also illustrated in Thurnell-Read's research (2012) on the stag tourism. In this research, Thurnell-Read argues that because Central Europe is historically seen as a distant, marginal and therefore liminal destination by societies of its western neighbours, male British tourists frequently travel to this geographical region with their disinhibition of 'drunkenness, casual sex and other extreme behaviours' (Thurnell-

Read 2012, p.801). This in part resembles my observations on 'Bangkok mode' (see 3.2.2 )

To further analyse how place myth generates liminality and thereby motivates tourists to engage in transgressive sexual practices, Clisby (2009) highlights the role of the atmosphere of a given place. Her study on an anonymous seaside resort exemplifies that the localised culture of drinking, clubbing and encountering new people establishes a carnival atmosphere that attaches to this place and has significant impacts on either tourists' or locals' sexual practices, which shows that place myth is reproduced through a mutually constructed dynamic between imaginations and realities while the boundary between them is usually blurred (Shield 1990; Crouch 2010). However, this place myth understanding of tourists' transgressive engagements in sex once again demonstrates that tourism as a sort of liminality is not a rupture in everyday lives, since, as Light states, tourists 'do not leave "home" behind' (Light 2009, p.242) when travelling. Instead, they normally carry 'knowledge, expectations, fantasies and mythologies of destinations' that they travel to (Craik 1997, p.118), which are reproduced and circulated within their daily lives. To reiterate, this perspective illustrates that the specific time-space of liminality is not only the subversion but also the extension of the social order of everyday lives. This critique offers a critical reflection to the analysis of this thesis. That is, while participants' engagements in sex tourism in Bangkok seem to signify resistance to the normalisations of sexual morality in Taiwan, it also can be their submission to other forms of normalisation in this society, which I will demonstrate in section 3.4 when discussing the connection between sex tourism and 'being a qualified gay man'.

The last feature tourism shares with liminality that results in tourists' transgressive sexual practices is 'time compression'. While the theory of liminality underlines that an individual's transgression of the social order occurs only in the bounded time span, Clisby (2009) clarifies that the temporality is not just the context but also one of the causes of liminality in tourism. In her research of a seaside resort, Clisby finds that tourists' transgressive practices of casual and unprotected sex are

intimately related to the fact that the encounters between them and the locals are seasonal and transient (Clisby 2009, p.60). This relationship between temporality and tourists' transgressive sexual practices is further illustrated by Thomas, who points out that female tourists' engagements in risky sexual activities when they travelled abroad are due to the 'time compression' of tourism (Thomas 2005, p.571). To be more specific, her research articulates that since travelling is a comparatively infrequent leisure activity, bound by a short time span, developments of a relationship and trust between tourists and strangers follow an unusually rapid pace that differs from daily life, which leads tourists to enter into liminality and makes it easier to have risky sex 'with new partners' (Thomas 2005, p.577). These three shared features between liminality and tourism not only elucidate why liminality is a particularly insightful concept to understand tourists' intensive engagements in sexual practices that transgress the social order of their daily lives, but also show why gay Taiwanese men normally switched to 'Bangkok mode' when travelling to Bangkok. The next section elaborates on this idea.

#### **3.2.2 Liminality and switching to 'Bangkok mode'**

These shared features between liminality and tourism are also embodied in participants' switches to 'Bangkok mode', which demonstrates that their intensive engagements in transgressive sexual practices in this city in part originated from the liminality of this particular time-space of travelling to Bangkok. According to the narratives of participants of this research in both interviews and casual conversations in the ethnography, many of them coincidentally used the term 'Bangkok mode' to describe a specific state that they entered into when travelling to Bangkok, which resulted in their engagements in transgressive sexual practices. 'Bangkok mode' led to participants experiencing multiple transformations in Bangkok, which range from internal mindsets to explicit practices.

Firstly, concerning internal mindsets, many participants revealed that their attitudes toward sexual morality changed in Bangkok as they generally became more 'open-minded' and less judgmental toward specific sexual practices. These

practices include, summarising different participants' statements, having sex<sup>30</sup> with strangers (casual sex), at improper places (such as a sauna or public spaces) or in the form of prostitution and group sex, which are normally regarded as 'immoral'<sup>31</sup> and transgressive of the social order of Taiwanese society. Secondly, the internal mindset of 'Bangkok mode' was also manifested in participants' continually hypersexual state during their travels to Bangkok. Many asserted that they had substantially elevated levels of sexual desire and '*turning to be horny when the airplane just landed the city*'. These particular transformations of internal mindset generally led to their explicit practices, which include, at first, wearing overly sexualised clothes. Participant KT observed that,

*Taiwanese gays tend to put on shorter shorts, tighter jeans and almost nude vests in Bangkok to seduce others, which they dare not do in Taiwan since these items are seen as too "coquettish" in [Taiwanese] society'. However, it seems they don't mind being a "slut" in Bangkok'. (KT, 41 years old, follow-up interview)*

Secondly, the explicit practices of 'Bangkok mode' also include participants frequently engaging in 'immoral' sexual practices normally avoided in daily lives. This avoidance was for the sake of maintaining their personal image as a 'decent', namely respectable (sexually moral) gay man, which showed participants' submission to the normalisation of sexual morality in Taiwan.

The transformation of participants' internal mindsets and explicit practices illustrate that their 'Bangkok mode' indeed embodies liminality. Firstly, 'Bangkok mode' represents a subversion of social order as liminality does while it leads to participants' particular mindsets and practices about sex in Bangkok that

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<sup>30</sup> Here the term 'sex' indicates different forms of sexual interactions in a general sense including anal sex, oral sex and fondling.

<sup>31</sup> Here, the term 'immoral' is taken directly from interviews, not my subjective judgement. The reason these interactions are regarded as 'immoral' lies in the specific social context of Taiwan, which is would be a worthy focus for future research project.

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transgress the norms of their everyday lives. Secondly, the temporary nature of 'Bangkok mode' is also akin to liminality since for many participants, it has to be 'switched off' when they return to the everyday lives. As participant Kyle sighed that, before he was about to go back to Taiwan from Bangkok, *'I have to turn into a boring and "normal" office man from now on'*. This sigh revealed that his sexual transgressions of engaging in particular sexual practices such as buying sex in the erotic massage or having casual sex in the sauna that initiated from 'Bangkok mode' were merely temporary and bounded break-outs from everyday lives, which are alike to the way that liminality operates, namely all of the social order will recur after the liminal time-space ends.

Gay Taiwanese men's 'Bangkok mode' embodies liminality also because the causes of their switch to this mode and the generation of liminality are intimately similar, which is evident in three aspects. First of all, many participants indicated that their switch to 'Bangkok mode' are related to the spatial displacement of travelling to a foreign country, which bring them anonymity and thereby freedom to engage in sexual practices that generally are regarded as 'immoral' in Taiwanese society. Because of their reliance on this anonymity, they no longer have to worry that their respectable image would be undermined through engaging in certain sexual practices. As participant A-Wan asserted, there are several constraints on sexual practices in daily life since it is easy to run across acquaintances when doing something transgressive, leading to widespread gossip and damage to one's personal image. However, for A-Wan, these constraints in Taiwan were entirely subverted when he travelled to Bangkok since this spatial displacement brought him anonymity, which, in his words, made him feel free to be a 'slut' without his respectable image being undermined. A-Wan's self-report of transforming into a 'slut' in Bangkok echoes Sacramento's (2011) work, in which he argues that the liminality generated by the spatial displacement of travelling usually causes an individual's identity transformation and hence motivates him/her to engage in transgressive sexual practices.

Secondly, participants also switched to 'Bangkok mode' because of their specific place myth of perceiving Bangkok as a sexually liberal city, which is established from a mixture of reality and imagination. One of the most frequently mentioned aspects of this place myth is Bangkok's gender fluidity, evident in the ubiquity of *kathoys* (ladyboys). As participant Joe stated, '*while lady-boys are everywhere, do you think there is anything else forbidden in this city?*' This statement discloses that, according to the reality of *kathoys*' high visibility, many participants inferred that other transgressive sexual practices would also be accepted unconditionally, causing them to switch to 'Bangkok mode'. Additionally, a large number of participants attributed their 'place myth' of Bangkok to its booming sex industry development. Participant Wei revealed that,

*When I googled 'prostitution for gay in Bangkok', there are pages of information of it and not to mention that there is even a "boy street" in Silom, which is for gay men exclusively. All of these reveal that being hypersexual or buying sex here [in Bangkok] is legitimate. (Wei, 35 years-old follow-up interview)*

Apart from this tangible evidence of 'boy street', participants' place myth of Bangkok also came from their encounters with hypersexual locals. Participant Kyle shared his personal experience that, when wandering in the city,

*You can tell that many people explicitly gaze on you with sexual desire regardless of their genders. Some of them even just came up and accosted me. It [Bangkok] is just like a hunting field, and everyone is so horny'. (Kyle, 25 years-old, follow-up interview)*

Therefore, Kyle asserted that his switch to Bangkok mode, namely being hypersexual and having casual sex in this city is likened to the proverb 'do as the Romans do'. However, while this place myth of Bangkok is seemingly established

on the reality of many objective facts, it also to some extent reflects just partial truth. Both Sanders (2002) and Peterson (2011) argue that Bangkok's sexually progressive culture is indeed circumscribed in particular districts of the city where tourists assemble, while the rest of its sexually conservative parts are usually ignored. Besides, according to Thailand's '*Penal Code Amendment Act*'<sup>32</sup>, prostitution is actually illegal in Thailand, which demonstrates the imaginative facet of place myth. To sum up, in the case of participants' place myth of Bangkok, it exemplifies an inclination to generalise circumscribed experiences and information as the truth. This generalisation reflects that participants not only passively receive the place myth but also actively participate in reproducing it.

Thirdly, the switch to 'Bangkok mode' also relates to the time compression of tourism. Some participants claimed that it was because of the rarity of some particular 'immoral' sexual practices in Taiwan, such as erotic massages or orgies, that led them to switch to 'Bangkok mode'. In addition, other participants also revealed that their 'Bangkok mode' was switched on due to the time compression of traveling since they viewed this short duration as opposite to their everyday lives. When explaining his experience of having casual sex with five different strangers within three days during his last trip to Bangkok, participant Jade asserted that it was because ordinarily his life is full of work and thus leaves little time for sex. He said this causes him to make the most use of his holidays in Bangkok to live by a 'sultry schedule' of sleeping with as many men as possible.

### 3.3 Relocating the scales of liminality in sex tourism

Through addressing both the causes and effects of 'Bangkok mode', the previous section exemplified that liminality is an illustrative framework to understand tourists' engagements in transgressive sexual practices. Moreover, the fieldwork also observed that participants' 'Bangkok mode' was not always switched on. To

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<sup>32</sup> See <http://www.impowr.org/content/current-legal-framework-prostitution-thailand>.

elaborate, the degree to which these participants switched to 'Bangkok mode' was not maintained at the same level as it indeed varied from different situations, such as particular spaces, time spans or groups of people. This observation shows that the scale in which liminality enacts and impacts tourists' engagements in transgressive sexual practices is multiple and hence requires closer analysis. In this section, through different cases of gay Taiwanese men engaging in transgressive sexual practices in Bangkok, I will further explore variability in the scale of liminality in sex tourism. I also discuss alternative causes of liminality, which differ from the spatial displacement, place myth and time compression emphasised in current research.

### **3.3.1 A spatial perspective: The physical environment and liminality**

First of all, the fieldwork of this research showed that the degree to which participants switched to 'Bangkok mode' was spatialised as it usually varied when they went to different socio-sexual spaces. This was evident in the distinct frequencies of their engagements in transgressive sexual practices across these spaces. The comparison between participants' socio-sexual interactions with others in two nightclubs, DJ Station and G.O.D., is an illustrative case which exemplifies that space is not only a specific sort of scale but also a fundamental cause of liminality. Both DJ Station and G.O.D. are popular gay clubs for foreign tourists located in Silom—a district famous for the sex industry. Given their geographical proximity, a five-minute walk, participants generally went to both during a night out. As the gay guidebook 'The gay male backpacking to Bangkok' (HUGO et al. 2014) introduces, DJ Station and G.O.D. are entirely different clubs, which manifest in their clientele and the way the clientele interacts with one another. Regarding DJ Station, the guidebook categorises it as an all-inclusive club which caters to different types of gay men of diverse ages, body shapes and ethnicities so that patrons usually engage in 'normal' clubbing activities such as chatting, drinking and dancing. Conversely, G.O.D. is depicted as a 'hardcore'



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space where muscular men gather, often semi-naked, making the interactions among patrons 'bolder', to quote the guidebook.

This introduction to a significant extent overlap with the 'place myth' of DJ Station and G.O.D. circulated among participants. Many of them described DJ Station as a 'vanilla'<sup>33</sup> club but emphasised G.O.D. as a place where transgressive practices were carried out commonly. For example, before we went to G.O.D., participant Joe warned me '*You must be careful, many of the patrons there use drugs, and I've also heard that some of them even have sex in the toilet.*' This place myth resulted in participants' transgressive sexual practices in G.O.D. For instance, some confessed that they came here mainly for '*experiencing something different*' or '*being naughty*', resonating with current studies of sex tourism that underscore the connection between place myth and tourists' sexual transgressions (Shield 1990, Light 2009, Thurnell-Read 2012).

However, more participants asserted that their sexual transgressions in G.O.D. were intimately related to its physical environment. These assertions were well summarised by participant Gun who stated that in G.O.D., patrons, including himself, tended to be more aggressive concerning initiating body contact with strangers that normally ended up developing into one-night stands:

*The environment there [G.O.D.] is different from other clubs. For instance, it's even darker which makes everyone much more shameless to touch or hug others while also be reckless about being touched. Also, the DJs there tend to play techno music with powerful beats, you know, that would excite you to dance harder with exaggerated body rhythm, which gives people more chances to have body contact and hence hook up with others. Oh... Besides, I think the air-conditioning there is basically broken or the staff just turn it off, it's super warm so that most*

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<sup>33</sup> In the interviews, many participants used the terms 'unexcited', 'normal', 'usual' to described DJ Station and the interactions among patrons in this club, which I summarised as 'vanilla' to denote conventional sexual interaction.

*men take off their tops. I think it makes the club more erotic so that stimulates people to touch others. (Gun, 37 years old, follow-up interview)*

This quote illustrates that the particular physical environment of G.O.D increases the degree to which participants switched to 'Bangkok mode', resulting in frequent engagements in transgressive sexual practices of initiating intimate body contact with strangers. This increase reflected that the degree of liminality within G.O.D. is higher than in other clubs, which comes partly from its particularly insufficient lighting.<sup>34</sup> As Gun pointed out, the dark environment of G.O.D. created anonymity and thereby generated recklessness to touch or even fondle strangers without permission, which are sexual practices typically viewed as sexual harassment (transgressive) in Taiwanese society. In contrast, the physical environment of DJ Station is much brighter (see Figure 5) so people can clearly recognise each other, which erases anonymity and leads its patrons to be self-disciplined and maintain proper boundaries.

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<sup>34</sup> While darkness is normal in nightclubs G.O.D. is unusually dark, to the extent that patrons cannot see others' faces clearly.



**Figure 5: DJ Station**

Secondly, the type of music clubs play also leads to notably different degrees of liminality between them. While DJ Station usually plays pop music such as hit songs from gay icons including Britney Spears, Lady Gaga and Beyoncé, many participants mentioned that they usually focused on activities such as lip-syncing these songs and dancing gently. These activities made them maintained a proper distance with others, which decreased the degrees of liminality and hence the possibilities of engaging in casual sex with strangers afterward. Contrastingly, when it comes to G.O.D., as Gun argues, the strong beats of techno music that play through the mega bass loudspeaker indeed amplified its patrons' rhythm, which caused frequent and intimate body contact among them and led to further sexual interactions in the club or one-night stands.

Lastly, from participant observations of different clubs in Bangkok, I also noticed that the temperature in G.O.D. is apparently higher than others which echoes Gun's reflection. Although it cannot be confirmed that whether the unusual heat

in G.O.D. is deliberate on the part of the club owner as Gun assumed, this heat did result in this club's 'nude landscape'—most patrons being topless (see Figure 6). This particular landscape not only legitimises the transgressive practise of being semi-naked in public but also incorporates it as a norm of this club. This norm increases the degree of the liminality in G.O.D. that, as Gun indicates, leads many muscular patrons to be semi-naked and fosters an erotic atmosphere, increasing body contact and stimulating further sexual interactions. In contrast, because the temperature in DJ Station is usually cool most patrons dress as neatly as they would ordinarily, which decreases the degree of liminality and thereby the legitimacy for its patrons to initiate transgressive sexual practices.



**Figure 6: G.O.D (the 'nude' landscape)**

To reiterate, the comparison of participants' socio-sexual interactions between DJ Station and G.O.D. showed that they did not switch to 'Bangkok mode' indiscriminately. Instead, it was switched on to different degrees across different socio-sexual spaces within this city. This difference, which is due to changes in physical environments such as lighting, illustrating two findings. Firstly, this research argues that, in tourism, liminality is enacted only in the scale of a specific

space rather than the entire travel destination. This spatialised perspective of the scale of liminality in tourism advances a rethink of the role space plays in generating liminality. This leads to the second finding of this section. Spatiality relates to the generation of liminality not only because of the spatial displacement and specific 'place myth' but also due to the physical environment of the space. It indeed plays an important role in creating liminality rather just serving as a backdrop.

### 3.3.2 A temporal perspective: The timing and liminality

The fieldwork also finds that participants do not always switch to 'Bangkok mode', suggesting that the generation of liminality is associated with spatiality as well as temporality. This association is illuminated through the example of the pavement outside of DJ Station. It acts as a particular time-space of liminality which leads gay men who have just left the club to have socio-sexual interactions in a transgressive manner. According to participant observations, I noticed that when DJ Station and G.O.D. were about to close, many gay club patrons would flow over to the pavement outside of the club.<sup>35</sup> Instead of returning home immediately, gay clubbers tended to gather to chat with friends or eat noodle soup or Hainan chicken rice from street vendors, which constitutes a ritual of accomplishing their night out. Within this time-space, a particular behavioural pattern – including many transgressive sexual practices such as initiating reckless body contacts and randomly asking strangers to exchange contact information – emerge. This created a sense of liminality at this specific time-space, on the pavement outside DJ Station.<sup>36</sup>

According to participants' self-reflections, when situated in this specific time-space they usually switched to 'Bangkok mode'. They generally conformed to the

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<sup>35</sup> This usually ranged from 1 to 3 a.m. since DJ Station usually closes at 2 a.m. while G.O.D closes at 3 or 4 a.m.

<sup>36</sup> From participant observations, these reckless body contacts include that clubbers tended to frequently touch strangers' nipples, genitals and buttocks or kiss their faces without permission on the pavement outside of DJ Station when the club was about to close



particular aforementioned behavioural pattern and also tended to lower their standards for physical appearance regarding choosing sexual partners. These transformations represented participants' engagements in the liminality of the pavement since the social order of touching others on the premise of their permission was subverted while the hierarchical distinction of sexual desirability (the 'pecking order', see 3.5.1) was eliminated as they were willing to 'hook up' with a broader range of men with less concern for physical appearance.

Considering participants' narrations, their engagements in liminality on the pavement seemed to be associated with the 'time compression' of tourism (Thomas 2005) mentioned above (see 3.2.1). Many participants claimed they generally travelled to Bangkok with an expectation of having sexual or romantic encounters with others so they preferred to go clubbing during the weekend since clubs are busier, which offered them a greater possibility to interact with men who meet their standards of physical appearance regarding choosing sexual partners. Moreover, since most of the participants travelled to Bangkok for no more than a week, so that they usually confronted merely a weekend during their trips to this city. Therefore, they go clubbing just for one or two nights during their travels to Bangkok, which become the rare opportunity for them to meet their expectations of 'hooking up'. It was due to such a compressed schedule that many participants switched to 'Bangkok mode' on the pavement outside of DJ Station after clubbing because the entire night out concluded at this particular time-space.

However, according to many participants, the reason they switched to 'Bangkok mode' on the pavement after clubbing was more intimately related to the specific timing in which this particular liminal time-space is situated during the routine of going clubbing in Silom rather than their compressed schedule of travelling to Bangkok. To be more precise, there is a ritualised routine of going clubbing in Silom amid gay men, which generally starts from going to DJ Station and then moving to G.O.D before ending the night with a meal at street vendors that are on the pavement and outside of DJ Station. It is this temporal routine that makes gay clubbers stay on the pavement at a specific timing which represents their last

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chances to hook up with others. Thus, some participants such as Chi used the term 'final big sale' to depict liminality here. He said that,

*You can see that many people became less picky compared to what they were in the clubs because they had no more chance to hook up after this moment. It seems like everyone is [sexually] available there [on the pavement]'. (Chi, 38 years old, follow-up interview)*

In addition, this specific timing led them to switch to 'Bangkok mode'. Most men were drunk and this common state of drunkenness amid people on the pavement after clubs were closed made many participants assume it was easier to develop one-night stands from this time-space since they believed that being drunk usually leads an individual to be 'hornier' and 'less picky', thereby broadening his range of sexual partners.

Moreover, the liminality of the pavement is also generated through an intersection between its physical environment and the specific timing. Some participants attributed their transgressive practices that carried on the pavement to its specific erotic atmosphere, which originates from the fact that this particular section of pavement is part of the famous *Patpong* night market where many sorts of sexualised products are sold. For instance, when I asked about the reason why many people include himself engage in sexual transgressions such as touching or accosting strangers recklessly on the pavement, participant Scott explained that *'it's because of a special atmosphere. I mean, while sex toys, porn DVDs, Viagra, soaps in dick shapes are sold on this pavement, you will think everything is acceptable here since it's just a very hypersexual place'*. However, this erotic atmosphere is indeed associated with a specific timing. It is only after 6 p.m. that the vendors of *Patpong* night market start to set up their stalls selling sexual products, while in the daytime this locale is just a normal pavement filled with students, tourists, office workers and vendors whom sell street food.

To sum up, the cases in which many participants' sexual practices turned out to be especially transgressive in the time-space of being on the pavement after clubbing exemplified that their 'Bangkok mode' was not switched on throughout the entire trip. Instead, they switched to this mode on the pavement at specific timings, such as after the clubs were closed or the when *Patpong* night market was open. This finding offers a temporal perspective, which demonstrates that not only the specific time span is also a scale of liminality, but that liminality in sex tourism is generated by specific timing rather than just time compression. Furthermore, the case of the pavement outside of nightclubs as a sexualised space where gay men engage in different forms of socio-sexual interaction also advances a yet-to-be discussed spatial scale which has attracted limited academic interest.

#### **3.3.3 A behavioural perspective: Collectiveness and liminality**

Furthermore, the cases of gay Taiwanese men switching to 'Bangkok mode' during the specific spaces and timings discussed also illuminated that the generation of liminality is intimately related to the people present in a space. For example, when talking about their sexually transgressive experiences in Bangkok, some participants asserted that they felt 'less inappropriate and shameful' to either be taken home by strangers for casual sex from the pavement outside DJ Station or take-off their shirts in G.O.D. since 'everyone there does that'. Thus, these cases exemplified that, for many participants, transgressive practices such as having casual sex with strangers or being semi-naked in public could be inverted into the licensed norms in circumscribed time-space because they were practised by most of the people present, which indicates that liminality was also generated through collective behaviours instead of merely specific spatial and temporal factors.

This research argues that liminality and transgressive sexual practices are mutually constructed. Although it is true that liminality leads individuals to engage in transgressive sexual practices, it is also the case that their collective engagements in these practices generate and sustain liminality. This argument is well illustrated by a common but puzzling phenomenon in the fieldwork, in which I observed that



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on the pavement outside DJ Station many participants were keen to instigate their companions to have one-night stands. This instigation was exhibited by participants verbally encouraging companions to accost strangers or even initiating conversations on their behalf. In follow-up interviews, however, when accounting for their intentions, most participants similarly stated that there is a 'hyper atmosphere' which led them to do so for the sake of having fun and sustaining the atmosphere. According to this phenomenon, the 'hyper atmosphere' is a sort of liminality that led to their transgressive sexual practice of instigating others to transgress social order. Moreover, from participants' statements, their instigations to some extent is for the sake of sustaining the 'hyper atmosphere', which exemplified the mutually constructing relationship between liminality and transgressive sexual practices.

The discussions above underline that the feature of collective engagement in transgressive sexual practices is another crucial cause of liminality, further encouraging participants' engagement. However, while in many cases participants seemed to be immersed in liminality without consciously thinking about it, other empirical cases demonstrated that some participants consciously created liminality and then entered into it. One of the most notable cases is from participants' experiences in the go-go bar. A go-go bar in Bangkok is a kind of space that combines a set of performances and prostitution (see 1.3.1). However, very few participants dared to request a 'go-go boy' even though they wanted to. According to participants' statements, this repression was mainly due to constraint from their friends with whom they travelled to Bangkok. As participant A-Wan shared, he suppressed his desire to order a 'go-go boy' in the bar since *'Nobody did that. Thus, I worried that if I started to do it, others [his friends] would regard me as a hypersexual and immoral guy'*. From this extract, the association between ordering a go-go boy and being regarded as 'a hypersexual and immoral guy' is due to prostitution being practically illegal in Taiwan, so many Taiwanese still view this

sexual practice as a form of sexual transgression.<sup>37</sup> A-Wan's statement revealed that, even during a specific time-space of travelling abroad and being at a highly sexualised space (go-go bar), he was not guaranteed to enter into liminality since the gazes from his friends worked as an extension of the social order in Taiwan, constraining him from engaging in this form of prostitution.

However, participant Benny's experience in the go-go bar told an entirely different story. As an old-hand Bangkok tourist, Benny guided four of his friends to travel to the city. In the follow-up interview, he proudly shared the tactic that he adopted to emancipate his friends from social order in their everyday lives and enable them to order go-go boys: *'it just needs an icebreaker like me. When I started to order the boy, I was breaking the rule and showing them [his companions] that it's normal to do that [ordering go-go boys] in the go-go bar'*. From my participant observation, Benny's tactic was effective as he and his friends were the very few participants who did this in the fieldwork. Thus, Benny and his friends' transgressive sexual practices of engaging in prostitution originated from his tactic of being the icebreaker, subverting the shared social order and generating a specific liminality among them. This case illustrates that, firstly, the scale of liminality is not circumscribed in a particular space or time span but also includes a specific group of people. Secondly, the effectiveness of Benny's tactic again demonstrated that the transgressive sexual practices play an important role in generating liminality, which was manifested in both unconsciously collective practices and a given individual's conscious actions.

### 3.4 Switching consciously to 'Bangkok mode'

The previous section explained that multiple factors, including spatiality, temporality and sexual practices, led participants to switch to 'Bangkok mode' and

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<sup>37</sup> In Taiwan, prostitution was theoretically decriminalised in 2009. But, whilst the Taiwanese central authorities declared that legitimate sex transactions were restricted to operating in specialised red-light districts and left 'the decision to set up these special zones to local government' (*Taipei Times* 2009, Jun 25th), practically speaking, prostitution is still illegal since none of the local governments in Taiwan have so far established such zones.

hence engage in transgressive sexual practices in the city. However, as in the case of Benny's icebreaking in the go-go bar, tourists' engagements in transgressive sexual practices were not always unconscious reactions to liminality. Instead, they represented conscious choices to become involved. In order to further explore gay Taiwanese men's conscious involvement in liminality, this section aims to unpack the conscious switch to 'Bangkok mode' and participants' motivation for the switch. In doing so, I will deconstruct the dynamic between participants' agency and the social structure behind their switch.

#### **3.4.1 Agency: Instrumentalising liminality**

From the fieldwork, this research finds that tourists' conscious involvement in liminality when engaging in transgressive sexual practices has been paid little attention in current studies of sex tourism. This consciousness, I argue, originates from participants' agency, namely their capacity to make decisions on their actions independently (Barker 2000), which manifested itself in three aspects.

First, this agency is embodied in participants' elaborate decisions to involve themselves in a particular time-space with an intense degree of liminality. For instance, many participants claimed that they repeatedly went to G.O.D or R3, the sauna which holds orgy parties, since they acknowledged that these spaces are more 'naughty' and liminal than others, making it easier for the clientele to engage in transgressive sexual practices such as casual or group sex, which meet their expectations of travelling to Bangkok. Likewise, some participants deliberately chose to go to these social-sexual spaces at the 'right timings'. For DJ Station, participants indicated that they preferred to go there from 12:30 a.m. to 1:30 a.m. because, within this time span, most of the patrons are about to be or are already drunk, encouraging them to initiate verbal or body contact with strangers. This generates a hypersexual atmosphere, which facilitates sexual encounters. These cases demonstrated that many participants were not immersed in liminality unconsciously. Instead, they consciously situate themselves in these liminal time-

spaces, knowing that it will fulfil their expectations of engaging in transgressive sexual practices when travelling to Bangkok.

Secondly, participants' agency to choose to be liminal was also embodied in their tactic of performing specific 'liminal state' to stimulate transgressive sexual interactions with strangers. From the fieldwork, 'pretending to be drunk', a tactic which participant Water instructed, elucidating this performance of liminality. Before going clubbing to DJ Station, Water told his friends that pretending to be drunk is an effective tactic to increase the possibility of hooking up with strangers because, in his understanding, most of the drunk people in the clubs turn out to be more vulnerable and reckless regarding socio-sexual interactions, which made them be viewed as sexually available by other patrons. Due to this association between a gay man's drunkenness and his sexual availability, Water claimed that, in clubs, being drunk allowed him to draw attention from others. This led them to initiate different forms of socio-sexual interactions with him, supposing that they had a better chance of success.

In fieldwork I experimented with this tactic a few times, for example by walking unsteadily to the toilet and smirking. I found that there was always a notably increased amount of people initiating conversations or even touching my genitals and buttocks in a transgressive way during my drunk performance. However, once I stopped this performance by acting 'awake' after going to the toilet, most people who approached me before correspondingly transformed their behaviours into a more moderate manner, a stark contrast from before. These experiments exemplified two points. Firstly, it illustrated an individual's agency to perform liminality manifests itself not just in my pretending to be intoxicated, but also other patrons' contrasting reactions to me during and after my 'liminal performances'. The contrasting reactions demonstrated that these patrons' transgressive sexual practices, such as touching my genitals and buttocks, did not just originate from liminality, but also their rational estimations of my drunkenness. This can also be viewed as their conscious performance of liminality. Viewed from this perspective, I argue that liminality is not just an objectively

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existent and self-evident state (or time-space), but also people's interactive or collective performance, which they enter into with consciousness.

Thirdly, apart from the 'liminal performance', participants' agency can be seen in their specific tactics of creating liminality, as in the case of Benny's icebreaking in the go-go bar. Through another example from participant Gun's set of practices in DJ Station, this section moves on to explore the intentions behind participants' creation of liminality when they travelled to Bangkok. On a night out with Gun and his friends, I introduced them to another group of participants, finally merging into a big group who stayed together in DJ Station. During this time span, Gun started to passionately instigate everyone in the group to drink more and, soon after, he suddenly opened my shirt and instigated other old and new friends to participate in this 'game'. In the follow-up interview, Gun explained this as follows:

*My aim [of instigating others to drink] was to help them to get rid of all the rules, which is my secret to make the night out become more interesting. And alcohol does matter since people start to go wild, to randomly hug or flirt with others when they are drunk. Instigating them [his friends] to take off your clothes was for the same purpose. Didn't you notice that after that, the atmosphere amid the group changed and everyone began to act in a more liberated way? (Gun, 37 years old, follow-up interview)*

This case not only reaffirmed individual agency to create liminality, manifested in Gun's different tactics, but also illuminated the intention to have his friends 'go wild' by switching to 'Bangkok mode' and hence subverting the social order of their daily lives to 'make the night out become more interesting'. However, during the interview, when I asked Gun to further clarify the relationship between his companions' subversions of social order and the fun of the night out, his response indicated that liminality is instrumentalised by individuals to serve personal interests. At first, Gun indicated that he initiated the game to take off my shirt for

the sake of facilitating his old and new friends to become familiar with each other because *'seeing each other losing control somehow makes them become closer'*. In his understanding, being transgressive is an individual's highly private side so disclosing it in front of others implies his trust in them, which usually leads to the establishment of an intimate tie. This understanding was supported by the fact that my relationships with participants and those between participants became more intimate shortly after we went clubbing together and witnessed each other's transgressive practices, demonstrated by their willingness to share their private sexual experiences. Moreover, this intimate tie between gay men in part also resembles the concept of 'communitas' in the sense of liminality. However, Gun's case shed a new light on this concept as it showed 'communitas' is not only the result of individuals' transgressive sexual practices, as the extant theory of liminality claims, but it is also the cause of these practices. Thus, some participants instrumentalised liminality to generate the sense of 'communitas', or intimacy between them and their friends.

Secondly, many participants instrumentalised liminality to legitimise their engagements in transgressive sexual practices. Gun confessed his conscious adoption of different tactics for guiding his friends to switch to 'Bangkok mode' was to pave the way for his potential sexual transgression. He explained that when the subversion of social order was collectivised among his friends, he then possessed freedom to engage in transgressive sexual practices since, in his words, 'everyone did so' and thus 'nobody will or be able to judge him'. This instrumentalisation of liminality for legitimising transgressive sexual practices also emerged in cases where participants consciously chose to go to specific liminal time-spaces. While these choices to some extent revealed their conscious participation in transgressive sexual practices, liminality then was instrumentalised as an excuse for them to disguise this consciousness, which enabled them to fulfil desires to be sexually transgressive in Bangkok while at the same time also maintaining their personal images as respectable gay men. Thus, participants' instrumentalisation of liminality in part represents their submission to the normalisation of gay men's sexual morality in Taiwan, echoing Light's (2009)

critical perspective that in the time-space of tourism liminality is not a rupture of everyday lives because tourists actually 'do not leave "home" behind' when travelling.

### 3.4.2 The social structure: Coercion into being liminal

However, some other cases in the fieldwork illustrated that participants consciously switched to 'Bangkok mode' and that engaging in transgressive sexual practices was not due to their agency. Instead, this switch represented their submission to the broader social structure, indicating they were coerced to engaging in these practices because they have internalised specific discourses regarding the definition of the qualified 'tourist' and 'gay man'.

In participants' narrations, similar statements were repeated about 'experiencing the specialty of local culture' and 'making self-breakthroughs', meaning doing something that had/could not be done in their ordinary lives. The place myth of Bangkok as a sexually liberal city is commonly circulated among gay Taiwanese men. This leads them to view going to social-sexual spaces, such as erotic massage parlours and saunas, and participating in sexual activities, including prostitution and casual/group sex, that transgress social order of Taiwanese society as parts of 'authentic' Thai culture. Thus, for many participants, engaging in these transgressive sexual practices is usually seen as a necessity to show that they are qualified tourists of Bangkok as these practices represent an intersection between experiencing authentic Thai culture and making self-breakthroughs. Nevertheless, although some participants engaged in these sexual transgressions consciously for the sake of being qualified tourists, this consciousness did not demonstrate their agency in liminality as there were reluctances, hesitations and rational calculations involved in these engagements. This revealed the intervention of specific discourses which form a broader social structure. An example of this intervention is from participant Egg's dilemma about whether to order a go-go boy in the go-go bar:

*I'm a very shy person and fear interacting with strangers. But when I travelled to Bangkok, I thought now that I'm already here [at the go-go boy bar], if I didn't order a boy, it would be a shame. It feels like I was not a qualified tourist and wasted this trip. So, I forced myself to order a boy and 'take him away' to my hotel. It was a horrible experience, but at least I made it. (Egg, 34 years old, follow-up interview)*

In this case, ordering a go-go boy constituted a transgressive sexual practice for Egg since prostitution remains (practically) illegal in Taiwan. However, his engagement in this sexual transgression originates from neither his unconscious involvement in the liminality of the go-go bar nor his willingness to do so. Instead, this sexual practice was an action following conscious calculation of avoiding being an 'unqualified' tourist. Nevertheless, this conscious calculation did not represent Egg's agency but a sort of self-coercion, emphasised in the wording that he, an introvert, 'forced himself to order a boy'. From the extract above, this self-coercion in part embodies Egg's internalisation and therefore his submission to the discourse of what constitutes a 'qualified tourist', in which travelling to Bangkok without experiencing authentic culture and making a self-breakthrough, through ordering a go-go boy, is considered a waste.

Moreover, according to the fieldwork, social structure played a role in coercing participants into switching to 'Bangkok mode' because, in addition to internalising specific discourses, they were motivated to impose these on others. For instance, the discourse of the 'qualified tourist' was frequently drawn upon by some participants to coerce peers into transgressive sexual practices. This was notable in a lunch date I arranged in order for participants Rabbit and Marco to get to know each other. During lunch, when we were discussing what to do later on, Rabbit proposed going to a gay sauna. Marco rejected this proposal, claiming he has never been to 'this kind of space' in his everyday life since casual sex is a typical way which STIs spread. However, Rabbit kept trying to persuade Marco to 'open his mind' and asserted 'We are already in Bangkok. If you don't go to "this kind of place", then why do you travel here [in Bangkok]?' In the end, Marco compromised and



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came to Sauna Mania with us despite his reluctance. In this instance, Rabbit's persuasion, which underlined the necessity of going to the sauna – a transgressive practice in Taiwan for many participants – when in Bangkok again illustrated the enactment of the discourse of the 'qualified tourist'. Furthermore, Macro's compromise showed how this specific discourse constituted collective pressure through participants imposing it on their peers in order to coerce them into engaging in particular transgressive sexual practices.

Secondly, the influence of the social structure which led participants to switch to 'Bangkok mode' can be seen in another discourse of the 'qualified gay man'. In the fieldwork, I discerned that – other than repressing sexual desires to maintain a 'decent', respectable image – being a 'qualified' gay man for some participants meant having sufficient sexual experience. For some other participants, a 'qualified gay man' even means being sexually liberal, which in their definitions included engaging in transgressive sexual practices because they believed that, while homosexuality itself is also outside of the traditional social order of 'good sex' (Rubin 1984), it is necessary to stand together with other forms of extraordinary sexuality to subvert the extant social structure. In the fieldwork, I observed that participants who believed these alternative discourses of the 'qualified gay man' were usually keen not only to share their sexual experiences – especially transgressive ones – with friends, but also to label those who did not engage in this as 'conservatives', 'cowards' and 'hypocrites'. Thus, in many cases, I found that participants engaged for the sake of avoiding being given these labels by their friends, which demonstrated that for them switching to 'Bangkok mode' was a coercion to be a 'qualified' gay man.

Similarly, the ways these alternative discourses of 'qualified gay men' led participants to engage in transgressive sexual practices were akin to the one of qualified tourist. To reiterate, both discourses coerce participants to switch to 'Bangkok mode' through not just collective pressures from peers but also because these gay men internalised these discourses and hence self-coerced themselves to switch into 'Bangkok mode'. The case of participant Ren illustrates clearly how this

self-coercion originates from the discourse of the 'qualified gay man' resulted in tourists' sexual transgressions when travelling abroad. When we first met, Ren requested me to guide him to every sort of socio-sexual space in Bangkok to experience different forms of sexual practice because he claimed he was inexperienced in such practices. However, from following him in Bangkok, I noticed that Ren derived very little enjoyment from this. Instead he seemed panicked and anxious in these socio-sexual spaces and relieved when we left. In the follow-up interview, to further explore the causes of these emotional shifts, we spoke of what led him to go to these social-sexual spaces and engage in different forms of sexual practices, including transgressive ones such as prostitution (erotic massage). He said the following:

*For me, going to these places is more like a duty that I assigned to myself before travelling to Bangkok [...] because I take these trips as an opportunity to mark some milestones in my life. That is, after going to these spaces and doing these things [transgressive sexual practices], I feel myself upgraded to just be like other gay men who have enriched sexual lives. So, I forced myself to be brave to go to these places and it has nothing to do with sex; all I want is to be a normal gay man. (Ren, 37 years old, follow-up interview)*

Ren's assertion about engaging in transgressive sexual practices as a self-assigned duty indicates his conscious engagement. However, this represented not his agency but his self-coercion, manifested in both his anxiety and his statement about 'forcing [himself] to be brave'. This self-coercion came from his intention to upgrade himself 'to be a normal gay man', which implied that he had internalised a specific discourse about what this meant. As Ren explained, his understanding of 'the normal gay man' originated from the fact that his gay friends '*always shared their enriched experiences of having different forms of sexual encounters at every kind of space*' and usually laughed at him as a 'prehistoric' or 'outdated' gay man due to his lack of sexual experience. Therefore, Ren regarded engaging in sexual

practices, including transgressive ones, as 'milestones' in his life since it led him to approach the specific lifestyle of other 'normal gay men' exemplified by his social circle. This evinces how participants' engagements in transgressive sexual practices were not the subversion of the extant social order of sexual morality, but submissions to the specific discourses of the 'qualified gay man' based on the endorsement of sexual liberation, which represents an alternative social order within the broader social structure. Thus, for some participants, their switches to 'Bangkok mode' were not generated from their own agency but rather the social structure. As social structure in part is also the origin of the normalisation of gay men's sexual morality in Taiwan, the cases of participants being coerced into switching to 'Bangkok mode' shows that their engagements in transgressive sexual practices, and hence sex tourism to Bangkok, are their submission to this normalisation.

To sum up, the cases in this section demonstrated that many participants indeed consciously involve themselves in liminality when they travel to Bangkok, due to either their agency or specific discourses derived from social structure. This consciousness illustrates that the social order of participants' daily lives was not subverted in the time-space of travelling to Bangkok. Thus, the research argues that liminality might not be the only cause of participants' engagements in transgressive sexual practices. Instead, these sexual transgressions are more likely the products of the contest either between their agency and the social order or between different sets of social order. Firstly, in the case that participants' agency led them to switch to 'Bangkok mode', while this exemplified agency in overcoming social structure as they have subverted the social order, this social order is still enacted in Bangkok because some had to instrumentalise liminality as an excuse to legitimise their sexual transgressions. Secondly, as in the case of social structure coercing participants into switching to 'Bangkok mode', their transgressive sexual practices here were caused by specific discourses about what it means to be a 'qualified tourist' and 'qualified gay man', representing the contest between different sets of social order.

### 3.5 Another cause of the switch to 'Bangkok mode'

From the discussion of participants' un/consciously switching to 'Bangkok mode', the thesis contends that liminality is not the cause but merely a means of engaging in transgressive sexual practices. The subversion of different sets of social order, such as the discourses of 'qualified tourists' and 'qualified gay man', is one of the essential features of liminality, did not occur when participants travelled to Bangkok. Additionally, as this section will demonstrate, another feature of liminality, 'communitas' (Turner 1974), did not emerge in many cases of participants' switches to 'Bangkok mode'. According to a sizeable body of research in tourism (Urry 2002, Light 2009, Weichselbaumer 2012), this sense of 'communitas' is manifested in intensive social bonding between people who coexist in the specific time-space of liminality which eliminates all forms of hierarchical distinction and so leads people to feel that they belong to an indissoluble collectivity. However, I found that hierarchical distinction among gay men, in line with the sexual desirability of their physical appearance, was not always eliminated when participants travelled to Bangkok.<sup>38</sup> This implies they switched to 'Bangkok mode' for other reasons. Through analysing the involvement of this hierarchical distinction in participants' 'Bangkok mode', this section considers that this cause might be the sexual desirability of the self and others, which determines not only participants' willingness, but also their ability to engage in transgressive sexual practices in different situations in Bangkok.

#### 3.5.1 The pecking order

In some participants' experiences, it seemed that the sense of 'communitas' existed in their socio-sexual interactions with others in Bangkok's socio-sexual spaces. For example, as participant Shen stated, it was in DJ Station that for the first time he felt he 'belongs to the gay community' since there was an 'equal feeling' among him and other gay men. When Shen clarified the term 'equal feeling', he pointed

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<sup>38</sup> Throughout this chapter, 'sexual desirability' refers to physical appearance.

out that from his past experiences in Taiwan's gay clubs or saunas, there is a hierarchical distinction that dominates gay men's socio-sexual interactions, which is based on sexual desirability, particularly physical appearance. This distinction among gay men was mentioned by almost every participant in this research. Specifically, many indicated that a gay man usually has romantic or sexual relationships with other men who are more or at least as desirable in terms of physical appearance as he is, akin to the 'pecking order'.

Shen claimed that as a normal looking guy he rarely dares to interact with handsome gay men in his daily life. However, when in DJ Station, since hearing from his friends that it is a club without any rules, Shen revealed that he started to recklessly embrace or even ask for contact information from conventionally handsome men. Surprisingly, Shen said that none of these men in DJ Station rejected his advances, while some of them even responded passionately by kissing him back or taking pictures with him. This suggests the pecking order that dominates gay men's social-sexual interactions in his daily life was eliminated and thereby generated the sense of 'communitas' and equality in the club. In the follow-up interview, Shen attributed this experience of 'communitas' with other gay men to the specific atmosphere, namely the liminality of DJ Station. This atmosphere led to the transformations of more handsome men's attitudes toward having socio-sexual interactions with strangers from being selective into indiscriminating.

However, as other participants reflected, especially those sexually desirable ones, the pecking order has never been eliminated in socio-sexual interactions with others even in a specific and liminal time-space because, for them, sexual desirability remains important. Nevertheless, from my participant observations, these 'popular' participants still had significant body contact, including hugging, kissing and fondling, regardless of physical appearance of people whom they interacted with, which seems to contradict their reflections. To explain this contradiction, participant Wood stated that although he viewed body contact initiated from, in his words, 'ugly guys' in DJ Station as a kind of 'sexual

harassment', he has never resisted these apparently unpleasant interactions because he noticed that,

*There is an invisible atmosphere that forced me to accept all of these 'sexual harassments'. It seems like that once you resist them, you'll become the black sheep who interrupts the pleasant atmosphere there [in DJ Station], which will make you feel guilty. (Wood, 28 years old, follow-up interview)*

In Wood's statement, the 'invisible atmosphere' in DJ Station is a kind of liminality that led him to interact with others regardless of their sexual desirability, which seemed to resonate with Shen's experiences of receiving positive feedback from more conventionally desirable clubbers. However, this liminality affected different people differently. It encouraged Shen to initiate socio-sexual interactions with others recklessly but coerced Wood to accept these interactions. Wood's judgement that being hugged, kissed and fondled by 'ugly guys' in DJ Station was 'sexual harassment' illustrated that the pecking order was not eliminated from the time-space of this nightclub. Thus his engagements in these interactions were not due to being involved in liminality unconsciously. Instead, this extract indicates Wood was coerced into engaging in these 'sexual harassments' for the sake of avoiding being '*the black sheep who interrupts the pleasant atmosphere*'. This self-coercion evinces the idea that liminality itself is an alternative form of social order that coerced participants into forming a sense of 'communitas' by accepting sexual harassment during this specific time-space. Therefore, participants indeed consciously accepted socio-sexual interactions with gay men who they were not interested in, reflecting their submission to the social order of liminality.

Two other cases occurring in gay saunas exemplify participants' resistance to this social order of liminality. The cases illustrate that participants' agency in engaging in transgressive sexual behaviours and the pecking order are not always eliminated from their social-sexual interactions, even when travelling to Bangkok. Firstly, the

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example of participant Rabbit's perspective on the 'mask night' in the gay sauna perfectly embodied this agency as well as the nonexistence of the sense of equality, and thereby 'communitas', among gay men in liminality. In a few of Bangkok's gay saunas, 'mask night' is a special weekend event during which attendees receive a plastic mask at the entrance to wear throughout. Theoretically speaking, the 'mask night' is supposed to be attractive since it is more liminal than other time-spaces because people find it easier to engage in transgressive sexual behaviours. The mask offers anonymity, liberating people from the constraints of social order. The mask also led to 'sexual equality' and thereby a sense of 'communitas' among its patrons, since their faces were covered thus obscuring their conventional attractiveness. The hierarchical distinction of sexual desirability was blurred, bringing more equal opportunities to 'hook up' with others than in the ordinary time-space in saunas. However, in practice, the 'communitas' feature of the 'mask night' seemed unattractive to participants; only a few of them participated. Participant Rabbit's reflection on his resistance to attend is summarised in different explanations for this issue among other participants:

*I think I'm handsome enough so putting a mask on my face is unnecessary, right ? [...] For me, this arrangement [mask night] is awful as it hides my strength [face] and also might lead to an embarrassing occasion that if I only realised that the guy who I hook up with is ugly after he taking off the mask, what could I do? I bet it's highly possible since this event must attract many ugly guys [...]so I have never participated in it. (Rabbit, 34 years old, follow-up interview)*

Rabbit's resistance to the social order of liminality (having casual sex in the sauna) is embodied by his avoidance of specific liminal events such as the 'mask night', which followed conscious consideration of the pros and cons of participating it. For Rabbit, this consideration included that the 'mask night' not only hides one of his most attractive features, his face, and makes him less likely to have sex with other conventionally attractive men, but also it poses the risk of interactions with

‘ugly guys’. For these reasons, Rabbit said that he prefers to go to gay saunas when there is no special event.

Secondly, another case of participants’ participations in an ‘orgy party’ at R3 Sauna also shows that the pecking order is not eliminated from their social-sexual interactions even when they travel to Bangkok. This is indicated by their rejection of transgressive sexual practices. The ‘orgy party’ is a one-hour event which is usually held at the loft of R3 Sauna. In this party, the sauna will invite 10 to 12 ‘R3 boys’ to perform sexual intercourse in front of patrons. After this performance, attendees are permitted to have one-on-one or group sex with these performers and other fellow attendees. From participant observations, many went to R3’s ‘orgy party’ in order to experience group sex since they rarely have the chance to do this in their daily lives. However, in fact, very few did engage in transgressive practices, complaining that both the performers and fellow attendees were sexually undesirable and did not ‘make them horny’.

From cases of these two special events, this research advances two critical arguments. First of all, they illuminate that the connection between participants’ engagements in transgressive sexual practices and the subversion of the social order is uncertain. Many participants participated in the R3 ‘orgy party’ to experience group sex, showing that the social order of their daily lives was subverted when they travelled to Bangkok since they actively pursued this transgressive sexual practice. However, this subversion did not lead to their engagements in the sexual transgression of group sex. Contrastingly, Rabbit shared that he felt guilty afterwards as he believes that casual sex is ‘immoral’. Although the social order Rabbit follows in daily life was not subverted when he travelled to Bangkok, he still engaged in ‘immoral’ casual sex with strangers, once again underlining the uncertain connection between participants’ engagements in transgressive sexual practices and the subversion of ordinary social order. While the subversion of social order is a fundamental feature of liminality, its uncertain connection with transgressive sexual behaviours demonstrates that liminality is



not the only cause of participants' engagements in sexual transgression when they travelled to Bangkok.

This links to a second argument– participants' willingness of engaging in transgressive sexual practices in Bangkok is determined by the sexual desirability of the people they shared these spaces with. This is key to the uncertain connection between participants' engagements in transgressive sexual practices and the subversion of the social order in their daily lives. In the case of Rabbit, he indicated that he went to the sauna for casual sex despite his guilt because in his daily life it is almost impossible to do so with conventionally attractive gay men. Likewise, many participants refrained from having group sex in the 'orgy party' in Bangkok's sauna because the performers and other attendees were insufficiently sexually attractive.

#### **3.5.2 The threshold for switching to 'Bangkok mode'**

Moreover, there were many cases in the fieldwork where participants' engagements in transgressive sexual practices were associated not with only others' sexual desirability but also their self-evaluations of this desirability. To elaborate, participants who evaluated themselves as sexually desirable were more likely to engage in transgressive sexual practices. Participant A-Wan's experience of interacting with others in the Sauna Mania in Bangkok accurately represented this association. When talking about this experience, A-Wan firstly mentioned that just a while after I brought him to the zone of numerous small rooms and corridors with low lighting within this sauna, he switched to a specific state, namely 'Bangkok mode', and touched anyone he liked recklessly. This switch resulted from other patrons' sexual advances, many of them both touching A-Wan and trying to take him to a private room for sex. All of these actions led him to evaluate himself as a sexually desirable man and hence motivated him to touch and flirt with others actively in Sauna Mania, which he rarely dares to do in his normal life.

A-Wan evaluated himself as a 'skinny and undesirable' gay man because of his many frustrated experiences of being ignored and rejected in social-sexual interactions by other gay men in Taiwan. However, in Sauna Mania he recalled that not long before leaving this sauna, he started to be intensively rejected or even pushed away by other patrons when he tried to approach them, which destroyed the positive self-evaluation of his sexual desirability that he had built up and caused him to switch off his 'Bangkok mode'. To depict this switch, A-Wan said '*I was awakened suddenly and started to feel embarrassed to touch others. It just felt like the shy and unconfident "me" came back*'.

There appears to be a dynamic interrelation between a gay man's self-evaluation of sexual desirability and his engagements in transgressive sexual practices. It was because of some other patrons' flirtations with A-Wan that his self-evaluation increased, leading him to switch to 'Bangkok mode' and engaged in transgressive sexual practices. Next, repeated rejections made him return to his ordinary self-evaluation as 'a skinny and undesirable gay man'. This self-evaluation caused A-Wan to believe that he is not supposed to and is unable to initiate socio-sexual interactions with others because, from past experience, this leads to embarrassing rejections due to the hierarchy of gay men's sexual desirability. This dynamic interrelation between a gay man's self-evaluation of sexual desirability and his engagements in transgressive sexual practices demonstrates that there is a threshold for participants to switch to 'Bangkok mode'.

For men who do not think of themselves as sexually desirable, they do not usually engage in transgressive sexual practices even if they want to, because they are frequently excluded from socio-sexual interaction among gay men. This exclusion resonates with Pritchard and Morgan's critical insight into liminality, in which they assert that liminality can never be 'experienced uniformly' by different people, while it 'might offer freedom for some, but unease, constraint or even threat for others' due to social differences (2006, p.765). This insight suggests the necessity of rethinking the notion of 'ownership of liminality', which many scholars of tourism studies sharply contend that the unequal use of liminal time-space in

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tourism industry reflects people's uneven social roles and economic status. This inequality can be seen in how rich foreign tourists' transgressive practices in the liminal time-space usually pose different forms of harm to impoverished local labours of the tourism industry who are excluded from this liminality (Clisby 2009, Chapman and Light 2017). Echoing this, the research further argues that unequal opportunities for switching to 'Bangkok mode' and transgressive sexual behaviours also lies in participants' different self-evaluations of sexual desirability. This argument underscores that the sexual desirability determines not only whether participants 'want to' but also whether they 'are able to' engage in transgressive sexual practices even when they travel to Bangkok.

Additionally, a gay man's self-evaluation of physical appearance and his engagements in transgressive sexual practices (liminality) is mutually constructed. Although a positive self-evaluation of one's sexual desirability eases the switch to 'Bangkok mode', it can also be the case that one engages in transgressive sexual practices in order to increase his self-evaluation of sexual desirability. This finding comes from a seeming contradiction between participant Rabbit's words and actions. Rabbit indicated his disgust with 'mask night' due to anxiety about having sex with 'ugly guys', which revealed that he had internalised the social order of the 'pecking order' in interacting with others. However, on the other hand, from my participant observations in the saunas and clubs, Rabbit indeed adopted an indiscriminating attitude, which allowing other patrons to initiate many kinds of sexual interactions with him such as hugging, kissing and fondling, regardless of their sexual desirability. When discussing this contradiction, Rabbit claimed that it was because, firstly, compared to anal sex, these sexual interactions were far less intimate (see 6.3.1 for more detailed discussions on the interrelation between intimacy and sexual desirability). Secondly he also enjoyed having these interactions since they increased his self-evaluation of sexual desirability:

*Even though they [ugly men] are not my type, I have never stopped them hugging, kissing and touching me. Actually, I think I like them doing that*

*because this made me feel that I'm 'hot'. (Rabbit, 34 years old, follow-up interview)*

In the interview, Rabbit further confessed that he indeed consciously utilised the indiscriminating attitude to pretend that he was in a state of liminality and allowed the 'ugly men' to intimately touch him. This liminal performance (see section 3.4.1) is for the sake of making other patrons to regard him as sexually available and thus attract them to initiate sexual interaction with him. These sexual advances then will increase Rabbit's self-evaluation of being 'hot', or sexually desirable. Many participants offered a similar perspective, repeatedly asserting that one of the most important aims for them to engage in transgressive sexual practices and hence sex tourism to Bangkok is to build up their self-esteem in terms of sexual desirability (See 5.3.2 for more discussion of the association between sex tourism and self-esteem establishment). However, this perspective poses an essential question: why do participants need to build up their self-esteem through engaging in transgressive sexual practices at the time-space of travelling to Bangkok instead of at home in Taiwan? Many argued this is because of they felt more sexually desirable in Bangkok. Rabbit reflected that his tactic of performing liminality only worked in Bangkok since gay Thai men usually view him as handsome. To summarise, according to gay Taiwanese men's experiences of travelling to Bangkok, this research contends that they commonly engage in transgressive sexual practices not only because of the liminality of time-space of travelling abroad, but because their self-evaluations of sexual desirability were enhanced in this specific time-space. The next chapter further explores the relationship between this enhancement and their engagements in social-sexual interactions with others in Bangkok.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Through the phenomenon of gay Taiwanese men switching to 'Bangkok mode', this chapter posits that liminality is an apt theory with which to explain why people engage in sex tourism. Participants' switches to 'Bangkok mode' (see 3.2.2)

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represent a temporary subversion of social order in their daily lives, caused by liminality generated by the specific time-spaces of travelling to Bangkok, including spatial displacement, place myths and time compression. However, the fieldwork of this research also demonstrates that applying the theory of liminality to analyse gay Taiwanese men's engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok is inadequate and even problematic, for three main reasons.

Firstly, the fact that participants did not always switch to 'Bangkok mode' suggests that liminality does not last throughout the entire time-space of their travels. Instead, liminality fragmentally occurred to different degrees in different situations. This calls for an elaborate discussion of these degrees in the context of tourism and a critical rethinking of factors that generate liminality in its various degrees. From comparing participants' different degrees of engagements in transgressive sexual practices, between clubs DJ Station and G.O.D, the research offers evidence that space is a scale of liminality. It also clarified that the physical environment of spaces, such as lighting, music and temperature, is an important factor in generating liminality. In the case of the pavement outside DJ Station, specific timing is both another scale of and a factor generating liminality. Moreover, through the examples of semi-naked clubbers in G.O.D and participant Benny's icebreaking in the go-go bar, this chapter argues that the scale of liminality can also be 'a group of people'. Meanwhile, liminality is generated through either people's unconscious collective behaviour or a person's conscious use of specific tactics, which subvert the social order of participants' daily lives.

Unlike current studies of tourism which implicitly assume that tourists are unconsciously immersed in liminality, this research finds instead that participants consciously switched to 'Bangkok mode' to engage in transgressive sexual practices, which is due to either their agency or Taiwanese social structure. Participants' deliberate switching to 'Bangkok mode' elicits a finding that they instrumentalised liminality for the sake of not only establishing intimacy with others, but also legitimatising their engagements in transgressive sexual practices. The latter can be seen from three aspects in particular. First, many participants chose to go to

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specific social-sexual spaces at particular times, such as the 'orgy party', consciously choosing this liminal state. At the second venue, the tactic of pretending to be drunk showed some participants were capable of performing liminality. Third, participant Benny's icebreaking in the go-go bar, and Gun's 'game' of instigating others to undress me, demonstrated that liminality can also be created through individuals' conscious tactics.

However, participants also consciously switched to 'Bangkok mode' due to the extension of social structure from their daily lives. As exemplified by the cases of Egg's self-coercion and Ren's notion of the 'milestones' that regards visiting different socio-sexual spaces as the milestone in his life, some participants were coerced to engage in transgressive sexual practices in order to conform to specific discourses of 'qualified tourists' and 'qualified gay men'. Such discourses are produced by the social structure circulated in Taiwanese society. The conscious switch to 'Bangkok mode', whether due to agency or Taiwan's social structure, indicates that social order subversion, the fundamental feature of liminality, is not fully achieved by engagement in transgressive sexual practices.

This research further interrogates the asserted connection between liminality and tourists' transgressive sexual practices found in current scholarship. Since the fieldwork reflects that the fundamental features of liminality – including subversion of social order and elimination of hierarchical distinction – did not fulfil expectations of 'Bangkok mode', engagements in transgressive sexual practices (and hence sex tourism to Bangkok) appear to result from factors other than liminality. Rabbit's disgust at the 'mask night' and many participants' refusal to engage in group sex in Sauna R3 outlines the hierarchical distinction or 'pecking order' among gay men, which was not always wholly eliminated in 'Bangkok mode'. The examples addressed that the sexual desirability of people who coexist at the same time-space plays an important role in determining whether participants 'want to' engage in transgressive sexual practices. Moreover, from the case of A-Wan's switch to and away from 'Bangkok mode' in Mania, the research also illuminates how participants' self-evaluations of sexual desirability determined

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whether they were 'able to' to engage in transgressive sexual practices. Thus, sexual desirability (of the self and others) can be considered a threshold for participants to switch to 'Bangkok mode'.

Lastly, through the discussions above, this chapter also addressed that gay Taiwanese men's engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok are their various responses to different normalisations of gay men in Taiwan. For instance, participants' switches to 'Bangkok mode' are apparently equivalent to their escapes from the normalisation of gay men's sexual morality in Taiwan. Besides, where participants instrumentalised liminality to legitimise their engagements in such practices or engaged in order to be a 'qualified gay man', by logical extension these facets of their sex tourism to Bangkok represent submission to different normalisation of gay men's sexual morality in Taiwan.

# Chapter 4

## Travelling in order to access other sexual fields

### 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has demonstrated that 'liminality' is insufficient to explain the scale of gay Taiwanese men's engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok. Meanwhile, the research found that participants engaged in different forms of sexual practices more frequently or even exclusively when they travelled to Bangkok, due to their enhanced sexual desirability in this city or its specific socio-sexual spaces. This finding reveals that sexual desirability is changeable and fluctuates across socio-spatial milieus since, as this chapter will illustrate, sexual desirability is not a fixed natural endowment but socially constructed in an arena of multiple desires that has been termed, after Bourdieu, the 'sexual field'. In line with the Bourdieusian approach, the theory of the sexual fields argues that the evaluating system which defines how different personal characteristics become desirable, namely the 'structure of desire' (see 4.2.1), is constructed and enacted within systems of judgement that delimit and are delimited by specific kinds of desires (Martin and George 2006, Green 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2016). Furthermore, presupposing there are then plural sexual fields with different structures of desire and criteria for judging attractiveness, and so an individual's sexual desirability will fluctuate as they move from one sexual field to another, since each field has its own particular structure of desire.

This chapter takes the theory of sexual fields and suggests that they will also vary spatially. The chapter thus adds a socio-spatial/temporal perspective to the theoretical framework of sexual fields. It thus identifies physical travel as a way people can change their sexual desirability. It explores the configurations of gay Taiwanese men's sexual desirability were created between their engagements in



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sex tourism to Bangkok and different forms of sexual practices. This chapter shows these sexual practices are not just a 'liminal' subversion of social orders, nor just the creation of a shared sexualised time-space zone, but a repositioning of actors in a sexual field of desirability – constructed amongst and between tourists and Thai men. In this sense, gay Taiwanese men's sex tourism to Bangkok is their escape from the normalisations of not only the sexual morality but also the sexual desirability in Taiwan.

To illustrate this argument, the chapter is structured in two main sections. The first will outline the theory of sexual fields and how it helps to analyse the hope for as well as experiences of gay Taiwanese men's sexual desirability enhancement when they travel from Taiwan to Bangkok. The analysis shows not only that participants' sexual desirability is changeable, but these fluctuations relate intimately to distinct structures of desire in Taiwan and Thailand. Thus, these two nation-states are demonstrably different sexual fields. This demonstration shows that the nation-state is one often overlooked scale of the sexual field, which indeed plays a crucial role in understanding gay men's sex tourism.

The section then turns to explore what makes Thailand an advantageous sexual field for Taiwanese gay men and explains critically that this is because of the 'Eastern Asian orientation' (see 4.2.2), a particular structure of desire in Thailand, which valorises Han ethnicity and Taiwanese nationality. Based on recognising this 'Eastern Asian orientation', the research advances the conception of 'sexual mobility' to explain gay Taiwanese men's sex tourism to Bangkok through a spiral between their engagements in this tourism and their enhanced sexual desirability. The section moves on to further investigate the influence of the 'Eastern Asian orientation' on participants and argues that it is the intersection of this structure of desire with participants' sexual habitus that leads them to carry out particular sexual practices. Through these practices a more comprehensive understanding of the spiral between participants' engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok and their enhanced sexual desirability will be provided.

The chapter finishes by arguing that many participants' enhanced sexual desirability in Bangkok, at least in given socio-sexual spaces, originates from Thailand's being a 'democratic' sexual field where 'every gay man can find his market' (see 4.3). Through the case of the participant Rabbit's sexual desirability fluctuating between the two saunas Chakran and Mania, this section shows that different socio-sexual spaces within Bangkok have their particular structures of desire and hence each is an autonomous sexual field. Identifying spaces as sexual fields, the section argues that the broader sexual field of Thailand/Bangkok is composed of many sub-sexual fields. It then proposes that these fields are interrelated in both a 'horizontally' juxtaposed and 'vertically' stratified pattern (see 4.3.2 and 4.3.3), which gives Bangkok its reputation as a democratic sexual field. The horizontal variation is the number of different venues catering to different proclivities, whilst the vertical is the number of places appealing to different levels of attractiveness within any given set of desires. This section ends by elucidating how Bangkok's 'democracy' led to the fluctuation in participants' desirability which in turn led to their consciousness of the fragility of their sexual status.

### 4.2 Thailand as another sexual field

Among participants' self-narratives, one of the notable similarities is that many evaluated themselves as 'inconspicuous' or even sexually 'undesirable' in ordinary life. This self-evaluation, in their words, comes from frustrated experiences of being ignored by other gay men in Taiwan. As many participants explained, these experiences are mainly due to the judgements of gay men's sexual desirability which particularly value young<sup>39</sup>, straight-acting<sup>40</sup>, muscular and tanned men. This dominant notion of sexual desirability leads to a 'pecking order' among gay Taiwanese men, most tending to interact with gay men who are at least equally (sexually) desirable as themselves. Therefore, within this 'pecking order',

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<sup>39</sup> In line with participants' definitions, this normally refers to those under the age of 30.

<sup>40</sup> In line with participants' definitions, 'straight-acting' indicates gay men who act like heterosexual males, opposite to more stereotypically feminine behaviours and characteristics.

participants who do not meet these criteria of sexual desirability normally have fewer chances for developing socio-sexual interactions.

In contrast, 'becoming sexy in Bangkok' is a feeling many participants shared. This feeling developed from there usually being more strangers initiating socio-sexual interactions, whether talking, toasting or flirting with them. If sexual desirability in Taiwan and Bangkok (Thailand) are different, then it suggests there are different structures of desirability dominating these two national 'sexual fields'. The next section will outline the theoretical perspective of sexual fields and its origins in Bourdieu's field theory.

### **4.2.1 Theorising sexual desire: A sexual fields framework**

Gay Taiwanese men's sexual-sociality is generally dominated by the aforementioned 'pecking order', a hierarchical system in which everyone struggles to enhance their sexual desirability to increase their chance of developing socio-interaction with others. This situation resembles the Bourdieusian conception of a social field. For Bourdieu, the world we live is composed of many fields of different categories (including economic, cultural and political ones) that represent specific hierarchical social structures which pertain to particular practices (Bourdieu 1991). These fields, though different in nature, can each be seen as a 'structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of capital'(Bourdieu 1991, p.14). People within the field are allocated to different positions by both the composition and volume of capital they possess (Bourdieu 1991). Here, the term 'capital' indicates not merely the economic sense, but represents a specific form of composite resources which 'confer a systematic advantage to those who possess it by providing the capacity to obtain the field's reward' (Green 2014a, p.12-13.). In this sense, Bourdieu asserts that 'a field is always the site of struggles' where people vie for accumulating capital which are specific to either maintaining or upgrading their status within it (1991, p.14).

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More importantly, each category of these fields has its corresponding system of evaluation that determines which personal features constitute capital and their values in the specific field. Additionally, each of these field-specific evaluation systems is reciprocally produced by habitus, 'a cognitive structure composed of durable and transposable dispositions of actors that orients and generates their practices, perceptions and attitudes (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.12). Also, due to this reciprocal relationship, both the field-specific evaluating system and habitus usually retain a dynamically amendable state. To elaborate, while the field-specific evaluating system is an aggregation of the habitus of people who are within it, the habitus established through a process of inculcating this evaluative system (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Therefore, Bourdieu regards habitus as a 'structured structure predisposed to function as structuring structures', which constitutes field theory along with field and capital (Bourdieu 1990, p.66-67).

Appropriating Bourdieu's theory of fields, a group of scholars have developed a 'sexual fields framework' to analyse the shaping of an individual's sexual desire, their sexual desirability and sexual practices from a sociological perspective (Martin and George 2006, Green 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2014a, Farrer 2010). Extending Giddens's (1992) claim that sexuality in contemporary society is an independent terrain in which an individual's pursuit of relationship separates from economic and status concern, these scholars have argued that the collective sexual life of humans is an autonomous field with its own logic and capital that is distinct from others (such as education, class and so forth). Specifically, as Green (2014a) defines it, a sexual field is conceptualised as an arena anchored on physical and/or virtual 'sites', ranging from gay bars, nightclubs and dating applications. A given sexual field is populated by actors whose sexual desires are socially reproduced by a hegemonic evaluating system toward 'certain bodies, affects, and practices while rendering others neuter or undesirable', and thus marked out by what Green terms the 'structure of desire' (2014b, p.28).

Concerning the structure of desire, Green (2011) emphasises that it is not only an aggregation of actors' notions of sexual desirability, namely their sexual habitus,

but it also reproduces this sexual habitus within the sexual field endogenously. Green argues that, by frequenting a given sexual field, actors will inculcate its specific structure of desire through the process of interacting with others, thereby gradually reconfiguring or reproducing their sexual habitus. Thus, actors who frequent a specific sexual field will eventually share a collective sexual habitus. This collective sexual habitus then permeates their interpersonal interactions with others 'determin[ing] the dominant currency of sexual capital' within it (Green 2014b, p.28). In Green's definition, sexual capital normally comes in the form of physical traits, affect<sup>41</sup> and sociocultural styles (2014b, p.49). The composition and volume of these forms of sexual capital that actors possess, or their 'sexual capital portfolio', determines their rank in the hierarchical system of sexual desirability, which in the language of sexual fields theory is where they fit in 'tiers of desirability' (Green 2014b, p.28). Consequently, actors whose sexual capital portfolios articulates with the given sexual field are usually located at a higher tier of desirability, which then brings them field-specific rewards such as 'greater choice in sexual partners, social significance and group membership' (Green 2008a, p.27). In contrast, actors whose portfolio of sexual capital mismatches with the sexual field generally face encounters of being ignored in or even excluded from other actors in this field.

### 4.2.2 Eastern Asian orientation: Nation-state as a sexual field

Through the lens of the sexual fields theory, there emerges a systematic understanding of participants' enhancement in sexual desirability when travelling from Taiwan to Bangkok. According to participants' narratives, the normalised notion of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan is indeed a hegemonic structure of desire which valorises particular personal characteristics (see 4.2), that create different portfolios of sexual capital. Most Taiwanese gay men, including this study's participants, are stratified into different positions within a hierarchical

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<sup>41</sup> In Green's definition, affect indicates specific comportments that communicate individuals' masculinity, femininity, ethnicity and socio-class.

system of 'tiers of sexual desirability'. Viewed from this perspective, many participants' frustrations with their everyday socio-sexual lives are due to their sexual capital portfolio mismatching with this specific structure of desire, thereby situated at a lower rank within the tiers of desirability in Taiwan. Furthermore, the notable homogeneity of participants' descriptions of gay men that they either desire or identify as desirable, suggests that they have internalised this specific structure of desire and thus share a collective sexual habitus with other gay Taiwanese men.

In contrast, participants' experiences of 'becoming sexy' when travelling to Bangkok, suggest that their sexual capital portfolio is evaluated differently there because, by their accounts, Thailand has a different idea of gay men's sexual desirability. The most notable distinction is that gay Thai men are especially attracted to Han males and their facial features. One comprehensive description summarising this differing sexual capital is from participant Chris. Following his personal experiences of travelling to Bangkok more than twenty times, Chris claimed that men with Han facial features, such as the single-folded eyelid, fair complexion and 'Phoenix eyes', are usually viewed as sexually desirable by gay Thai men. My observations during fieldwork resonate with this perception. It was apparent that gay men who possess these Han facial features were normally those who had many socio-sexual interactions in different socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok. Since more than 90% Taiwan's population is Han<sup>42</sup>, most participants have these typical facial features. When they travelled to Bangkok, these features meant they generally enjoyed enhanced sexual desirability. The role of Han facial features in participants' enhanced sexual desirability was evidenced by how often they reported that local gay men who approached them usually complimented their fair complexion and 'Phoenix eyes'.

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<sup>42</sup> The data is from Ministry of Interior (Department of Statistics). See <http://statis.moi.gov.tw/micst/stmain.jsp?sys=100>

In fact, this distinct structure of desire in Thailand was also demonstrated in Kang's (2017) research on gay Thai men. Through reviewing different forms of erotic material – from gay pornography and gay magazines to advertisements for gay saunas – Kang found that most of their actors or cover models have Eastern Asian facial features. Combining this visual evidence with interviews, Kang argues there is a 'reorientation of desire away from Caucasian partners towards East Asian ones' (2017, p.182) among Thai gay men, which he terms the 'Eastern Asian orientation' in Thai society. Kang claims that in this society, a fundamental indicator of beauty is 'whiteness', or fair complexion. This particular sexual fascination with whiteness among gay Thai men, or their sexual habitus in Bourdieusian terms, is 'relatively homogeneous across individuals from a similar background' since it is cultivated from specific social conditions within which they situated' (Bourdieu 1991, p.12). For Kang (2017), the social condition cultivating this 'Eastern Asian orientation' is associated with the specific domestic and international context of Thailand's political economy.

First, he points out that this 'Eastern Asian orientation' has been 'constructed through established social categories and hierarchies' in Thailand (Kang 2017, p.184). That is, in Thai society, dark skin is associated with the working classes<sup>43</sup> and thus represents disadvantaged social-economic status, which is regarded as a negative connotation in terms of sexual capital. Conversely, white skin is a symbol of high society in Thailand as it implies people having white-collar jobs, whom most local gay men prefer to date or 'hook up' with. Secondly, Kang also suggests that 'Eastern/White Asians are considered the ideal dating or sexual subject for gay men in Thailand due to a collective disdain for interracial relationships with Caucasians, due to connotations of sex work or paid companionship. In Thailand, all forms of prostitution are highly stigmatised because this occupation not only represents an individual's impoverishment but also means they are regarded as the black sheep, spoiling the national image by contributing to the country's

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<sup>43</sup> This relates to a climatic/geographical feature of Thailand as this country locates at tropics and mostly in full sun so that people who engages in labour-intensive work outdoor usually with dark skin.

reputation as the 'brothel to the world' (Kang 2017, p.183, p.186). Owing to the attendant fear of being mistaken for sex workers, gay Thai men then develop a specific dating preference for 'Eastern/White Asians' while at the same time avoiding Caucasians and contributing to a particular sexual fascination for Eastern Asian males. Thirdly, Kang further indicates that within this 'Eastern orientation', there is a hierarchical list of partner preference that stratifies gay men by nation, which 'mirrors the economic status of its citizens' (2017, p.200). However, this whiteness is specifically 'associated with certain ethnicities, most notably Sino-Thai, Chinese, Japanese and Korean', which Kang names 'White Asians' (2017, p.189).<sup>44</sup> According to these specific social conditions, the ethnicity and facial features of Han become a sort of advantageous sexual capital for men who live in or travel to Thailand.

My study concurs that, being akin to Han ethnicity, the enhancement in participants' sexual desirability in Bangkok is associated with their nationality. Some participants, especially the more experienced (old-hand) tourists of this sort, said that there has been a devaluation of Han ethnicity as a form of sexual capital in Thailand due to the influx of gay mainland Chinese tourists' into Bangkok. This has diluted the particularity of Han facial features and also attached a negative label to this ethnicity. For instance, participant Gun asserted that because of some gay Chinese men's negative behaviour in socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok, such as shouting at each other in saunas or pushing other clubbers, he has noticed that gay Thai men are no longer as interested in people of Han ethnicity. From his observation, Gun claimed, is why many fewer people now approach him and his Taiwanese friends in Bangkok's gay clubs.

Meanwhile, however, Gun and many other participants indicated that their sexual desirability remain enhanced in Bangkok, compared to at home, and especially after locals discovered they were Taiwanese. On the subject of his sexual

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<sup>44</sup> In his research, Kang elaborates that 'White Asians' include 'Thais of Chinese descent and East or White Asians, namely Japanese; Korean; those refer to as "tropical Chinese" coming from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia'. (Kang 2017, p.189)



desirability in Bangkok, participant Joe argued that *'I think we [Taiwanese] are still attractive to locals [Thais] since we are Taiwanese. Many Thai friends told me they love the Taiwanese more than other Asians because of our social grace.'* Kang (2017) makes a similar argument. Through interviews about Thai gay men's preferences for 'White Asians', Kang argues that Taiwanese men are 'popular partners [for gay Thai men] (p.202). They are considered the easiest-going among the tropical Chinese, with a character most similar to Thais' (Kang 2017, p.202). It is because of their interpersonal interactions with others in Bangkok's socio-sexual spaces that gay Taiwanese men are reputed as a sort of 'White Asian' with social graces by local men. This makes Taiwanese nationality a form of sexual capital in Thailand.

To sum up, by reading through the lens of sexual fields theory, Thai gay men's particular fascinations with Han ethnicity (especially Han facial features and fair complexion) and Taiwanese nationality illustrate that these personal characteristics are forms of sexual capital in Thailand. Having these variations of sexual capital led participants to experience enhanced sexual desirability when they travelled to Bangkok. This enhancement indicates that there are different structures of desire between Taiwan and Thailand and hence they contain distinct sexual fields. This distinction underlines that the nation-state inflects the sexual field, a process often overlooked in studies which are normally conducted within one country and therefore tend to regard the nation-state as a backdrop rather than an analytic focus.

### 4.2.3 Sexual mobility in a dual sense

Many participants stated that one reason for undertaking sex tourism to Bangkok related to their enhanced sexual desirability there. I call this the promise of sexual mobility which is composed of two interrelated types of mobility; an upward movement of participants' tiers of desirability when they enact the physical movement of traveling to Bangkok. A typical case, which elucidates this concept, comes from participant Jade, an effeminate and slender gay man who evaluates himself as sexually undesirable. He bases this self-evaluation on rarely having

sexual encounters in either physical or virtual socio-sexual spaces in his daily life. For instance, Jade said for many times he wondered whether his 'Grindr application'<sup>45</sup> was broken since it '*has never rung*'. However, when Jade travelled to Bangkok, many men messaged him through Grindr to arrange to meet, which shows that he moved up the tiers of desirability presumably. He attributed this upward movement to his Han facial features and their currency in the context of Thailand's 'Eastern Asian orientation'. This enhanced sexual desirability gave Jade greater choice in sexual partners, or at least more chances for sexual encounters. This motivated him to travel to Bangkok frequently and also prioritise the socio-sexual spaces in his itinerary (as compared to travelling to other destinations). This sexualised itinerary then led him to, sleep with many different men, which turns his journeys to Bangkok into a form of sex tourism.

Jade's case points to the conception of sexual mobility and helps clarify that the physical movement in travelling abroad and upward movement to a higher tier of desirability are connected, creating a spiral between participants' sex tourism to Bangkok and their sexual desirability enhancement. Through undertaking in sex tourism to Bangkok and having plenty of sexual encounters, Jade perceived that his sexual desirability was enhanced. Because his sexual desirability was usually enhanced in Bangkok, this aroused his desire to engage repeatedly in sex tourism to this city. This spiral provides an alternative perspective from which to analyse the phenomenon of gay Taiwanese men's intensive engagements in socio-sexual spaces and sexual practices when they travelled to Bangkok, which complicates and challenges the role of liminality in sex tourism.

It challenges the usual explanation of sex tourism through a permissive liminality by suggesting a national scale of structure of desire plays a more crucial role in terms of motivating sex tourists. This is because an individual's sexual desirability, enhanced by the match between his sexual capital portfolio and a shift in national

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<sup>45</sup> Grindr is one of the most popular mobile dating applications for gay men in Taiwan, and indeed worldwide.

sexual field creates opportunities, rather than simply challenging restrictions (see 3.5.2). As Jade clarified, he has rarely had sexual encounters in socio-sexual spaces in ordinary life not because these spaces in Taiwan are heavily policed, or desexualised, but because he is evaluated as undesirable by gay Taiwanese men. In contrast, due to his Han facial features and Thailand's 'Eastern Asian orientation' (the structure of desire in Thailand) many local gay men approached him actively. This then allows him to engage in Bangkok's liminality and fit into its socio-sexual spaces to have casual sex with other gay men frequently. Therefore, gay Taiwanese men engage repeatedly in sex tourism to Bangkok, not simply because this city is liminal or generally permissive, but more importantly because it is an advantageous sexual field for them. Also from Jade's case, his contrasting states of promiscuity in Bangkok and being celibate, in his words, *'like a virgin'* in Taiwan do not involve either his or the location's attitudinal reversal toward sexual morality as models of liminality imply. As he insisted, casual sex is not an *'immoral'* sexual practice for him at any time or in daily lives, so his intensive engagements in this in Bangkok were mainly due to his increased sexual choice and occasions for sexual encounters, which related more to his sexual desirability enhancement.

### 4.2.4 Eastern Asian orientation as the sexual habitus of tourists

However, some other cases in the fieldwork provide a more comprehensive insight into unpacking the spiral between participants' engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok and their sexual desirability enhancements in this city. These cases demonstrate that Thailand's 'Eastern Asian orientation', which plays an important role in forming this spiral, is not only an external national structure of desire. More importantly, I argue that this 'Eastern Asian orientation' is also part of participants' (tourists') sexual habitus, which directs them to carry out particular sexual practices that gives rise to to the spiral between sex tourism and enhanced sexual desirability. The example from participant KT illustrates this insight. KT is an overweight gay man in his early 40s who believes that: *'Thai people have their fantasies toward Taiwanese. Trust me, we are "hot cakes" in Bangkok.'* To exemplify this belief, KT shared his experience of actively flirting with and eventually

‘hooking up’ with a young, handsome and muscular Thai soldier last time he travelled to Bangkok. However, KT revealed that he has never accosted anyone in his daily life not due to a sense of inappropriateness but due to his certainty of failure. He asserted that his physical appearance does not articulate with the notion of sexual desirability in Taiwan and hence he would be rejected by gay Taiwanese men if he were to approach them. But when I asked KT whether he was afraid of being rejected by this Thai soldier before approaching him, he replied *‘No, I wasn’t. Because I’m Taiwanese, I supposed he would love to hook up with me so I dared to do so’*.

This case shows that KT’s success with the Thai soldier, who would be above his tier of desirability in Taiwan, is not simply because of the Thailand’s structure of desire (Eastern Asian orientation), but also KT’s response and enhanced self-confidence contributing to his sexual practice of active flirting. From a sexual fields perspective, Green (2014a) asserts that sexual practice is the act an individual carries out in the given sexual field, which is in line with his evaluation of his tier of desirability within this field. This evaluation is made from an individual’s sexual habitus, an internalisation of the structure of desire through his embodied experiences of frequenting the given sexual field. From this perspective, KT’s particular sexual practice of actively flirting originates from his self-evaluation as ‘hot cake’ in Bangkok because of his sexual habitus of acknowledging the ‘Eastern Asian orientation’ of Thailand.

However, among the interviews with KT and many other participants, it seemed that their changed sexual habitus in Thailand is not derived solely from their embodied experiences of interacting with gay Thai men. It is also established by the prevalent place myth of ‘gay Taiwanese men are popular in Bangkok’ that circulates in Taiwan. This place myth is spread by word of mouth and in gay guidebooks among participants. For instance, KT said he learnt of gay Thai men’s special fantasies about Taiwanese men from his gay friends’ stories before he actually travelled to Bangkok for the first time. For KT’s friend Ren, another participant, his acknowledgement of ‘Eastern Asian orientation’ was obtained from

the experiences KT shared, as well as the guidebook 'The gay male backpacking to Bangkok' (HUGO et al. 2014). This book introduces gay culture in Thailand and points out that '*Because there has been a trend of "Sino-fever" and "Korea fetish" in Thailand's pop culture, Taiwanese also becomes very popular in the gay scene since we look similar to Chinese or Koreans.*' If participants' changed sexual habitus results from their place myth of Thailand's 'Eastern Asian orientation', it may also be maintained by selective memory and confirmation bias. An advantage of doing participant observation as well as interviews was that when accompanying KT in Bangkok, for example, I observed that it was not rare for his approaches to be rejected by local gay men. The increased chances of having socio-sexual interactions gave KT a stock of positive experiences of interacting with gay Thai men, which gave him a willingness to approach people with new found self-confidence, but his selective recall downplayed many negative encounters that might disrupt this self-narrative.

These examples illustrate that Thailand's 'Eastern Asian orientation' is not merely an objectively existent structure of desire of this nation-state (and also sexual field), but also part of participants' sexual habitus, which combines with their embodied experiences and subjective beliefs (place myth and biased memory). Even if the 'East Asian orientation' was entirely mythical, the sexual habitus created through such belief would be real. Looking at both the sexual field and the way an understanding of that field shapes the practices of actors offers a more comprehensive understanding of the spiral between participants' engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok and their enhanced sexual desirability. Drawing on KT's case, firstly, it was his sexual habitus responding to Thailand's 'Eastern Asian orientation' – established from his embodied experiences, place myth and biased memory – that produced his sexual practices. These include travelling to Bangkok repeatedly, making his itinerary of these travels full of socio-sexual spaces and, dominantly, interacting with local gay men in an active way. These sexual practices, combined with Thailand's structure of desire of 'Eastern Asian orientation', brought KT many sexual encounters in Bangkok, confirming the enhancement in his sexual desirability. This confirmation further strengthened KT's sexual habitus

of 'Eastern Asian orientation' in Thailand, motivating him to engage in sex tourism to Bangkok repeatedly.

This case also offers clarification of the connotations of sexual habitus. In the current framework of the sexual field, sexual habitus refers to an individual's tacitly cultivated and habituated erotic tastes, or a personal evaluating system of sexual desirability. KT's assertion that he has never accosted others in daily life due to his perception that his physical appearance does not articulate with ideas of sexual desirability in Taiwan, shows that his sexual habitus of the 'Eastern Asian orientation' does not represent his erotic tastes for evaluating himself and others. Instead, 'Eastern Asian orientation' is his corresponding cognition of Thailand's structure of desire.

### 4.3 Bangkok as a democratic sexual field

Apart from 'Eastern Asian orientation', some other participants said they engage in sex tourism to Bangkok because 'every gay man can find his own market', or the niche, in this city. As participant Joe explained, the term 'market' is not used in an economic sense but to represent either 'a specific socio-sexual space or a group of people' who appreciate a specific type of physical appearance, which resembles the concept of the sexual field. Therefore, Joe claimed that *'No matter how you look, there would be someone willing to fuck you in Bangkok.'* This claim discloses that the notion of gay men's sexual desirability in this city is plural and hence it is not a homogenous sexual field dominated by a hegemonic structure of desire. This plurality of structures of desire in Bangkok can be further demonstrated in that participants' sexual desirability is enhanced differently across different socio-sexual spaces. In my participant observation, these differential enhancements in part shape participants' spatial preferences for frequenting specific socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok since their tiers of desirability are higher here than elsewhere. These spatial preferences suggest again that there is a spiral between an individual's sexual desirability enhancement and his physical movements of accessing the given sexual field as mentioned in previous section, which is

particularly insightful in understanding sexual practices of going to specific socio-sexual spaces, as well as behaving in specific ways.

### 4.3.1 Spaces as sexual fields

A representative instance of the spiral between gay Taiwanese men's preferences in socio-sexual spaces and their sexual desirability enhancements comes from participant Rabbit whose particular preference is Sauna Chakran. Rabbit has typical Han facial features and hence has always experienced notably enhanced sexual desirability when he travels in Bangkok. However, the degree of this enhancement fluctuates across different socio-sexual spaces and he reflected that he usually attracted far more gay men to approach him in Chakran than any other sauna, and so he frequents this venue. This reflection was borne out during participant observation with Rabbit in both Chakran and Mania, through which I found out that patrons were treating him in dramatically different ways in these two saunas. In Chakran, Rabbit was always followed by many patrons, including many young and muscular gay men who are normally viewed as sexually desirable.<sup>46</sup> However, just a few men approached Rabbit in Mania, mostly older and less physically fit men who fall outside conventional ideas of attractiveness.

During the interview, when discussing his experiences in Chakran and Mania, Rabbit and I concluded that the fluctuation in his sexual desirability between these two saunas was intimately associated with their distinct spatial design. Chakran in part resembles a resort; outside of the main building there is a bright courtyard with a swimming pool (see figure 4.1). In this space, patrons can observe others' physical attractiveness, both their faces and bodies, and evaluate their sexual desirability visually. Therefore, Rabbit's typical Han facial features brought him lots of followers and sexual encounters in Chakran. Contrastingly, the spatial design of Mania is akin to most typical saunas and is composed of numerous small rooms and corridors with low lighting. Thus, patrons of Mania tend to evaluate

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<sup>46</sup> In gay saunas, following is an implicit way in which patrons express sexual interest in others.



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others' sexual desirability through touching, so muscular and well-endowed men have the most advantageous forms of sexual capital here. Since Rabbit's slender frame does not match Mania's structure of desire, he was not treated as a sexually desirable subject in this sauna, which was evident in the number of men who followed him and how conventionally attractive they were.



**Figure 7: Sauna Chakran (courtyard)**

Rabbit's case also suggests an alternative perspective from which to rethink relationships between socio-sexual spaces and sexual fields in a non-Western context. In current studies, socio-sexual spaces are typically regarded as 'physical sites' to which sexual fields are anchored (Green 2014a, Hennen 2014). This perspective somehow reflects that most of these studies are conducted in the context of Western gay men's sexual sociality which comprises numerous elaborately developed sexual subcultures and identities such as Bears and Leathermen. Even these studies have noticed that socio-sexual spaces such as these have their particular structure of desire, but tend to interpret this fact as the result of a steady flux of visitors who belong to a particular sexual subculture and collectively project their sexual habitus into a given space. In this sense, socio-



sexual spaces are normally regarded as physical sites within which given sexual fields operate, while the physical settings of these spaces just play a role in communicating their structures of desire. However, returning to Rabbit's case in Bangkok, it shows that the structure of desire of some socio-sexual spaces such as Chakran and Mania does not originate from any elaborately developed sexual subculture. On the contrary, these two saunas' structures of desire are in part constructed within and partially relate to their spatial design, such as lighting, since they to a large extent determine the way in which visitors evaluate others' sexual desirability. To reiterate, since the spatial design of different socio-sexual spaces plays a crucial role in constructing their structure of desire, these socio-sexual spaces constitute autonomous sexual fields.

### **4.3.2 Horizontal juxtaposition of sexual fields**

Furthermore, the case of Rabbit's spatial preferences suggests that sexual fields are interrelated in multiple ways, which have not been properly discussed in existing research. First of all, these multiple interrelations involve sexual fields in different scales. On the one hand, Rabbit's experiences of being followed by many patrons in Chakran imply that sub-sexual fields such as gay saunas are 'embedded' in the broader sexual field of Thailand. This embedding is seen in how Thailand's 'Eastern Asian orientation' (structure of desire) infiltrates Chakran. On the other hand, Rabbit's lower tier of sexual desirability in Mania showed that the 'Eastern Asian orientation' does not structure desire in this sauna, which points to another interrelation between sexual fields at different scales. That is, micro- or sub-sexual fields with differing logics and inflections may just 'exist' in a national sexual field.

This irrelevance also emerges in sexual fields in the same scale. For example, typological knowledge regarding gay saunas in Bangkok, which circulating among participants illuminates that each socio-sexual space has a distinct structure of desire. From many participants' narratives, there seems to be a consensus that

‘Sauna Chakran is for’ twink<sup>47</sup>, Mania is for muscular guys, and Babylon is for ‘potato queens’<sup>48</sup>, while Underground 39 is for people who prefer Thai locals’. This typological knowledge discloses that sub-sexual fields of different gay saunas are indeed juxtaposed with others without hierarchical distinction, since each of these spaces represents a particular and horizontally differential structure of desire. This horizontally juxtaposed interrelation among sexual sub-fields in turn shows that Thailand as a broader sexual field has plural structures of desire, namely markets, scattering within it. For some participants, this plurality of structures of desire means ‘every gay man can find his market’ in Bangkok, and so they can articulate their specific sexual capital portfolio with the logics of desire in one of many different socio-sexual spaces in this city. For instance, participant Scott attributed having notably far more sexual encounters in Bangkok to Thai tastes:

*I think it's all about the taste toward people. I mean in Thai society, their [gay Thai men's] tastes are much more diverse as they don't request gays to fit in any specific type [of appearance]. Conversely, in Taiwan, you have to be masculine, you have to have muscle and so on. If not, you'd better stay at home and not go anywhere as it would be impossible for you to hook up with anyone [...] Yes, since in this society [Taiwan], the definition of handsome is very narrow. (Scott, 42 years old, follow-up interview)*

Following this statement, Scott further clarified that the ‘diverse tastes’ of gay Thai men is evident in its socio-sexual spaces, in which there are different criteria for sexual desirability. Thus, Scott asserted that although he is ‘sexually undesirable for most of the Taiwanese’, since he is overweight and in his forties, he became more

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<sup>47</sup> In Western gay culture, a ‘twink’ is usually considered a homosexual male with attractive, boyish qualities. Typically from the ages of 18-25, and often thought as a young, white, fashionable male. Here the thesis appropriates this term to refer to young gay men with slender or slim form

<sup>48</sup> A potato queen is a gay Asian male who is predominantly attracted to only gay white males. ‘Potato’ describes the gay white male as it suggests his supposed primary food form. Queen describes a gay person of flamboyant nature.

sexually desirable at least in some socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok. From a sexual fields perspective, Scott's self-evaluation as '*sexually undesirable in Taiwan*' is because his sexual capital portfolio does not articulate with almost every socio-sexual space in this nation-state, with its homogenous structures of desire which privilege young, masculine and physically fit gay men. This homogeneity reflects that Taiwan's sexual field has a singular and dominating structure of desire. By contrast, Scott's assertion that he can be sexually desirable when he travels to Bangkok indicates that Thailand as a sexual field has plural structures of desire, scattered in different socio-sexual spaces, and one of them may match with his physical appearance. This understanding of Bangkok would seem to align with Green's concept of the 'democratic sexual field'. That is, a sexual field populated by people 'with a plurality of erotic preferences that produce multiple, coincident structures of desire' (Green 2008a, p.46), while simultaneously, none of these structures 'prevails over others' so as to 'afford value to everyone' in the field (Green 2014b, p.29, p.32).

To assume that Bangkok is a totally democratic sexual field is problematic, yet, I observed that some participants were regarded as sexually undesirable across almost every socio-sexual space in Bangkok. These observations imply that 'every gay man can find his market' is also a kind of 'place myth' of Bangkok generalised from limited personal experience of becoming sexually desirable in specific spaces, but downplaying being undesirable in others. Secondly, these observations also show that although there are plural structures of desire in Bangkok, this reality does not guarantee this city as a democratic sexual field. While multiple socio-sexual spaces articulate their own idea of sexual desirability in quite narrow and specific terms, they still stratify patrons into different tiers of desirability and thereby generate respective groups of sexually undesirable men within those fields. To summarise, although Thailand as a sexual field seems to have many sub-sexual fields of socio-sexual spaces, which are interrelated in a horizontally juxtaposed pattern without hierarchy and cater to different physical appearances (such as ages, body shapes and ethnicities), some participants still felt none of the socio-sexual spaces in this city made them feel sexually desirable.

### 4.3.3 Vertical stratification of sexual fields

Although some gay men remain unable to develop socio-sexual interactions at any socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok, other participants still believed this city to be a sexual paradise where ‘every gay man can find his market’, assuming that these gay men ‘*Have not identified the right place to go to.*’ For example, when talking about his favourite socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok, participant Art, a gay man in his early fifties, mentioned that he prefers going to sauna ‘Heaven’ for pragmatic reasons. To be more specific, for Art, his experiences in other saunas were frustrating as he was usually ignored due to being older and not physically fit, which does not articulate with the structures of desire in most of these spaces. However, when in Heaven, Art thought he looked much more sexually desirable than other patrons since this sauna, according to his and other participants’ descriptions, is typically populated by older, less physically fit men who are regarded as sexually undesirable more generally. Other patrons’ sexual undesirability led to Art’s enhanced desirability in Heaven, and hence he had more opportunities for developing socio-sexual interaction here. Therefore, through his experiences in Heaven, like many other participants, Art asserted that Bangkok is a place which exemplifies ‘every gay man to find his market’, as long as they ‘*go to the right place*’ in a vertically stratified ‘market’ of tiers of desirability, rather than a horizontally diverse set of fields with different criteria of desire

Art’s pragmatic choice to visit this sauna again exemplifies the spiral between gay Taiwanese men’s sexual practice of frequenting specific socio-sexual spaces and their enhanced sexual desirability within these spaces. Furthermore, it also illustrates an alternative set of interrelations among the sexual sub-field of socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok. That is, they are in part vertically stratified in accordance with the average tier of sexual desirability of their clientele. Specifically, since other saunas in Bangkok are mostly populated by young gay men with physical fitness, these saunas are ranked higher than Heaven within a hierarchy (vertical stratification) of socio-sexual spaces. This vertically stratified interrelation of

socio-sexual spaces demonstrates that, firstly, across differing structures of desire in Bangkok, there is a shared notion of sexual desirability that appreciates youth and physical fitness. For instance, Art was excluded from other saunas but attracted many gay men in Heaven because of his age and body shape. Viewed from this point, these spaces share a normalised notion of sexual desirability but have their respective standards within this, which constitute distinct structures of desire and hence evaluated Art's desirability differently. The research suggests therefore that the distinction between structures of desire lies not only in their different notions of sexual desirability but also the yardstick with which they measure it.

This shared notion of sexual desirability among Bangkok's socio-sexual spaces came up in a conversation I had with participant Aqua. When we chatted about his favourite socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok, he replied '*I think for me, they are all the same. I mean, if I was a 'Tien-Tsai'*<sup>49</sup>, *I wouldn't mind about where to go since everywhere would be fun for me.*' In Mandarin, the term '*Tien-Tsai*' indicates extremely sexually desirable people who everyone wants to date, sleep with, or simply be. From Aqua's thoughts and other participant observations, these '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men were normally viewed as sexually desirable across different socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok and it was expected that they 'would have fun everywhere'.

Therefore, even on the condition that each of the socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok has their particular structures of desire, as shown by typological knowledge of gay saunas, *Tien-Tsai* suggests that these structures are not entirely insulated from each other. In contrast, there is an overlapping domain among these structures which represents a dominant structure of desire that especially appreciates a few physical characteristics, such as youth and physical fitness. In practice, the fact

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<sup>49</sup> This means 'God-dish' in Mandarin. In Taiwanese popular culture, young generations tend to use the term 'Tsai' to indicate to someone is their ideal type for dating or sex. 'Tien-Tsai' has dual senses. On the one hand, it means someone is extremely desirable and everyone's ideal type. On the other hand, because of this extreme sexual desirability, 'Tien-Tsai' is usually considered unapproachable in a godlike way.

that plural structures of desire in Bangkok are both insulated from and overlap with each other suggests that the notions of sexual desirability are neither totally unified nor totally autonomous across different sexual fields. In light of this ambiguous boundary among different structures of desire, I argue that it might be better understood through the conception of sexual capital hierarchy.

In Green's theoretical framework, sexual capital is a set of personal characteristics including physical traits, affect and sociocultural style (Green 2014b, p.49), which are valourised with different weights in different sexual fields. However, according to my fieldwork, some of these personal characteristics are generally seen as more valuable than others, since they are either widely applicable or prioritised across most of the sexual fields. For example, youth and physical fitness are kinds of this 'core sexual capital' which apply to Taiwan, Thailand and almost every socio-sexual space in Bangkok. Conversely, Han facial features as a form of sexual capital seem to be 'periphery' that are less important than others. In Art's case, although he has Han facial features, he is not young or physically fit, as shown by his frustrating experiences in most socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok. These experiences exemplified the notable difference between core and peripheral sexual capital in terms of their relative importance in and the breadth they can apply to different sexual fields. Viewed from the perspective of sexual capital hierarchy, while gay men's sexual desirability is determined not just by the compatibility (degree of matching) between the structure of desire and their sexual capital portfolio, but also, the more 'core sexual capital' one possesses, the more likely one is to be evaluated as sexually desirable.<sup>50</sup>

### 4.3.4 The relativity of sexual desirability

From Art's experiences, it seems a man's sexual desirability is determined not just by the compatibility between the structure of desire of a given sexual field and his sexual capital portfolio, but also a comparison between him and other gay men

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<sup>50</sup> Here 'more' indicates both more different types and a higher quality of 'core sexual capital'.

who are present in the same time-space. This argument relates to the concept of the 'circuit' that Adam and Green (2014) advance. They indicate that a 'circuit' is the collection of gay men with homogenous composition for sexual capital and generally recur 'in some of the same socio-sexual spaces over time' (Adam and Green 2014, p.123). However, my argument differs from Adam and Green's since, in their account, this 'circuit' of gay men in a specific sexual field plays a pivotal role in evaluating a given individual's sexual desirability because it involves the process of constituting this sexual field's structure of desire. This constitution is mediated through the circuit of gay men expressing their aggregated sexual habitus through their socio-sexual interactions with others in the specific sexual field. However, in Art's case, since Heaven and other saunas share a similar notion of sexual desirability that value youth and physical fitness, the way circuits of gay men influence evaluations on his sexual desirability was through immediate comparison. As Art stated, the enhancement in his sexual desirability in Heaven resulted from other patrons coexisting in this space, who form a circuit of gay men and are mostly older and less physically fit than he is.

In fact, influences that 'the circuit' imposed on producing fluctuation in participants' sexual desirability were not only across different spaces but also over time. This is because homogenous groups of gay men, in terms of their tier of desirability, may recur densely within specific time spans. A notable case is during 'Songkran', a festival of Thai New Year which always attracts a huge number of gay male tourists to assemble in Bangkok and includes many '*Tien-Tsai*' who are situated in the top tiers of desirability in a general sense. According to the narrations of many participants, it was due to the intensive presence of '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men during 'Songkran' that raised the collective standard of sexual desirability in the sexual field of Bangkok within this festive time span. This in turn caused a general downgrade of most of participants' tiers of desirability. For instance, when participant B recalled his experience of rejecting a sexual invitation from a good-looking guy during Songkran, he attributed this rejection to it occurring during festival. As he said,

*If it [sexual invitation from the good-looking guy] happened another time, definitely I would sleep with him. But because it was in Songkran I guess that led to my pickiness in terms of choosing sexual partners. You know, there were so many hot guys around which made him not that attractive. (B, 30 years old, follow-up interview)*

B's case shows that temporality is indeed another crucial aspect relating to how 'the circuit' reconfigures a given gay man's sexual desirability and sexual habitus as a specific group of gay men tend to recur in similar time-spaces. However, in most other circumstances, the composition of a given sexual field's population is highly unpredictable, which made participants' sexual desirability fluctuate in a contingent manner because it is usually a result of comparison with the other men present.

### 4.3.5 The precarity of sexual desirability

The analysis above clarifies how 'every gay man can find his market in Bangkok', a common phrase that many participants used to describe the democratic or egalitarian feature of gay men's sexual-sociality in this city, is intimately related to the fluctuating evaluations of their sexual desirability they received. To elaborate, these fluctuating evaluations result from Bangkok's encompassing socio-sexual spaces of diverse notions and yardstick of sexual desirability so that participants usually received different evaluations across these spaces. It is the fluctuation in their sexual desirability that led to participants' sexual practices of frequenting specific socio sexual spaces, or 'their markets', hence afforded them more opportunities for socio-sexual interactions. However, I argue that this rhetoric of 'every gay man can find its market' by no means demonstrates Bangkok is a democratic sexual field, an inclusive place catering to gay men of different types of physical appearance. The market is one of niches, based on the stratified use of the space, which allocates gay men to different classes of socio-sexual spaces in line with their tiers of sexual desirability. For instance, Art's spatial preference for



Heaven shows how less sexually desirable men are usually circumscribed to a 'lower class' space in terms of its clienteles' average tier of desirability.

Moreover, I would also argue that although the experiences of 'becoming sexy' at given socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok in part relieved participants' anxiety about their lack of sexual desirability, the fluctuating evaluations of sexual desirability they received across different socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok also caused their precarious self-evaluations. As mentioned above, while socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok are interrelated in both a horizontally juxtaposed and vertically stratified pattern, this indicates that the notion of gay men's sexual desirability is neither entirely unified nor utterly relativistic across these spaces.<sup>51</sup> In Bangkok, there is a rough consensus concerning sexual desirability among gay men, but it is not without nuance. This equivocal notion of sexual desirability, then, leads to a particular distribution that only a handful participants were assured of their tiers of desirability. The rest largely felt insecure due to their mixed experiences of being evaluated as both sexually desirable and undesirable across different spaces in Bangkok.

This precarity turned out to be even more extreme as evaluations of sexual desirability were also made through comparison with other gay men who contingently coexisted with participants, thereby causing their sexual desirability to fluctuate more unpredictably. Even when participants went to specific socio-sexual spaces where they were normally regarded as sexually desirable, their tiers of desirability within this space remained precarious. As participant Rabbit said in an interview, sauna Chakran is a socio-sexual space where he normally attracted considerable sexual interest, but sometimes scarcely any men expressed their interest in him. This then aroused his anxieties relating to being inadequately desirable, which he regularly experienced in Taiwan, and he began to wonder '*Am I not attractive in Thailand anymore?*' In my fieldwork, precarious self-evaluation

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<sup>51</sup> To elaborate, while it is true that the vertical stratification among socio-sexual spaces shows there is a dominant structure of desire arranging them, the horizontal juxtaposition of these spaces shows each of them has its own particular structures of desire.

of sexual desirability is a collective complex among participants, which has been accumulated from their everyday lives and continues even after they 'found their market' in Bangkok. This collective complex closely relates to gay Taiwanese men's incentive to cultivate and demonstrate their sexual desirability. This incentive is another another paramount factor motivating them to repeatedly travel to Bangkok, which the next chapter will discuss in greater detail.

### 4.4 Conclusion

Rethinking why gay Taiwanese men engage in sex tourism to Bangkok, this chapter demonstrates that enhanced sexual desirability in this city and its specific socio-sexual spaces is a crucial factor. Through participants' experiences of travelling to Bangkok, the research reflects that an individual's sexual desirability is changeable and usually in flux. This is because an individual's sexual desirability is evaluated differently by different structures of desire anchored to multiple scales of sexual fields, including the nation-state, socio-sexual space, time span and even specific groups of people. Identifying this changeable nature of sexual desirability, the research illustrates that there is a spiral between an individual's sexual practices of frequenting specific sexual fields and his sexual desirability enhancement. This spiral offers an alternative framework to understand gay Taiwanese men' sex tourism in Bangkok. That is to say, the phenomenon that gay Taiwanese men repeatedly engage in this tourism is due to their sexual desirability being generally enhanced in this city, or at least in some particular socio-sexual spaces within it.

As is clear from Jade's experiences with Grindr and KT's active flirting with the Thai soldier, this enhancement mainly originates from Thailand being a sexual field that differs from Taiwan. First, the 'Eastern Asian orientation' of Thailand, a particular structure of desire that appreciates the Han ethnicity and Taiwanese nationality, to a large degree matches the sexual capital portfolio of gay Taiwanese men and leads to their enhanced sexual desirability. Second, this enhancement is due to Bangkok being a democratic sexual field with plural structures of desire. This means, at least to some extent, that 'every gay man can find his own market',

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because diverse sexual capital portfolios can match with some or at least one of these structures.

However, my fieldwork clarifies that the enhanced sexual desirability of gay Taiwanese men does not occur everywhere, at every time and for everyone in Bangkok. This clarification demonstrates that participants' belief in Thailand as either an advantageous sexual field with its 'Eastern Asian orientation' or a democratic sexual field is a mixture of the objectively existent structure(s) of desire and their subjective beliefs, namely sexual habitus. The sexual habitus plays two roles in influencing participants' experiences of engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok. Firstly, it oriented their sexual practices of frequenting specific socio-sexual spaces and interacting with specific types of gay men (mostly more conventionally attractive men) in a specific manner (mostly more actively). This created a feeling that they were sexually desirable. Secondly, the sexual habitus also oriented participants to selectively recall and interpret their socio-sexual experiences in ways that reinforce it. These experiences reproduce the place myth of 'Eastern orientation' and 'every gay man can find his market', further intensifying participants' sexual habitus in it. This then continually orients their sexual practices in and memory as well as interpretation of Bangkok.

Lastly, this chapter points out that travelling to different sexual fields might enhance participants' sexual desirability and thus facilitate more opportunities for socio-sexual interactions with others, which relieves anxieties about lacking sexual desirability. However, from many participants' narrations, it seems that travelling across different sexual fields causes unpredictable fluctuations in desirability. The scales and boundaries of sexual fields are changeable, and sometimes in a contingent manner because they are intimately related to the 'circuit' of gay men coexisting in the same time-space. These unpredictable fluctuations then result in many participants' precarious self-evaluations of their own sexual desirability and motivated them to either affirm or accrue their sexual capital, which the next chapter analyses in detail

# Chapter 5

## Travelling in order to accrue sexual capital

### 5.1 Introduction

As illustrated in the previous chapter, Bangkok is a heterogeneous sexual field within which plural structures of desire operate. Even though this sexual field seems 'democratic' and has a particular structure of desire of 'Eastern Asian orientation', which favours Han facial features and Taiwanese nationality, many participants experienced significant fluctuations in their sexual desirability across different socio-sexual spaces when they travelled to Bangkok. These fluctuations exacerbated their already precarious self-evaluation of sexual desirability and motivated them to find ways to increase it. As this chapter will demonstrate, an overall enhancement in sexual desirability is achieved through not just accessing another sexual fields but accruing sexual capital, which is another important reason that gay Taiwanese men engage in sex tourism to Bangkok repeatedly.

This chapter will propose three distinct mechanisms of enhancing sexual desirability, namely learning, enacting and performing sexual capital. These mechanisms unveil multifaceted meanings and functions of the experiences of undertaking sexual practices for participants. That is, through engaging in different sexual activities when travelling to Bangkok, participants not only fulfil their sexual desires, but also learn to be, construct the self-esteem in and perform the image of, a sexually desirable gay man. However, it is worth noting that these learnings, constructions and performances reflected in participants' engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok is more than an escape from but a submission to the normalisation of, or hegemonic structures defining gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan.

## Chapter 5 - Sexual Capital

Moreover, by proposing these three mechanisms this chapter also intervenes in the debate on the nature of sexual capital. According to sexual fields theory, sexual capital is an assemblage of different personal characteristics which compose an individual's sexual desirability (Green 2008a, 2014a). For Hakim (2011a), however, these characteristics are not only inherent but also can be accrued through 'learning'. Thus, she asserts sexual capital is indeed a kind of 'portable personal asset' that everyone can obtain and apply to different sexual fields. However, Green inverts this version of sexual capital, arguing instead that it is 'a situational outgrowth of sexual field' and emphasising that every characteristic is neutral and its sexual currency is differently conferred by the structure of desire of each sexual field (Green 2013, p.149). However, through further analysing the three mechanisms for enhancing sexual desirability, this chapter will argue that accruing sexual capital relies on both willingness and also one's particular competency. Secondly, the currency of sexual capital is not always situational as the given form it, namely 'infrastructural sexual capital' enabling other forms to immunise from the influence of different situations.

In the first section, this chapter argues that learning sexual capital involves a particular 'learnt mechanism', including identifying what personal characteristics are sexually desirable and then imitating these in socio-sexual interactions. Thus, the research claims that learning sexual capital requires a corresponding learning competency, which I term the 'infrastructural sexual capital' that aids gay men to accrue other forms of sexual capital. After this, the second part of this chapter argues that the sexual capital is also not just a 'situational outgrowth of sexual field' since its sexual currency is not only conferred by the structure of desire but also relies on its alignment with other sexual capital, namely an 'enacting mechanism'. This conjunction is enabled by a gay man's self-esteem around his sexual desirability, which constitutes another form of 'infrastructural sexual capital'. The third section of the chapter will advance an alternative understanding of a gay man's sexual desirability, as being composed of particular socio-sexual interactions he is having or has had. Following this understanding, the research clarifies how sexual desirability is also enhanced through a 'performative mechanism'. That is,

through repetitively engaging in ‘conspicuous interactions’, such as undertaking given socio-sexual activities with particular types of people, at specific spaces, and then relaying these to others, a gay man creates his sexually desirable image to convince others that he is sexually desirable, which then leads to the enhancement in his sexual desirability. Therefore, the chapter argues that sexual capital is indeed not just the inherent and acquired personal characteristics. Instead, it is also an assemblage of ‘conspicuous interactions’ which a gay man experiences, has experienced and represents.

### **5.2 Learning sexual capital: The learnt competency**

Sexual capital – according to Hakim (2011a, 2011b) – is both an assemblage of innate and acquired characteristics, where the latter can be learnt as long as an individual is willing. However, this can imply that everyone can accrue sexual capital if they wish. My fieldwork demonstrates such an implication overlooks that accruing sexual capital involves both a learnt competency and competency to learn. Acquiring sexual capital occurred in specific socio-sexual spaces and at extremely different paces. Drawing on two empirical examples, this section will exemplify how sexual capital is accrued through a learning mechanism based on a particular learnt competency, which includes ‘identifying’ what personal characteristics are advantageous for having socio-sexual interactions and ‘imitating’ them through experiences of repetitive practice of these interactions. Subsequently, the section will illuminate how this sexual capital learning mechanism and learnt competency are intertwined with participants’ desires for, and engagement in, sex tourism to Bangkok.

#### **5.2.1 The competency to identify sexual capital**

In the interviews, especially with participants who are lacking experiences of engaging in socio-sexual interaction with other gay men in their daily lives, the terms such as ‘cram school’ and ‘intensive training session’ were repeatedly used to describe what are ostensibly leisure trips to Bangkok. For these participants, sex tourism to Bangkok in part resembles remedial education which facilitates them

to, in participant Ren's words, '*learn to be a more attractive or at least "normal" gay man.*' For Ren, this normalcy includes how to express the attractive self and interact with other gay men, such as know-how on managing physical appearance and interpersonal skills of accosting or flirting. Ren's desires for learning to be an attractive or 'normal' gay man are embodied in his attempt of obsessively seeking out different socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok.<sup>52</sup> In the fieldwork I noticed that although Ren rarely had any socio-sexual interactions with others in socio-sexual spaces, which is one of the fundamental ends for most of my participants, he was still enthusiastic about visiting these spaces. This unusual pattern was explained as Ren claimed that his purpose of going to socio-sexual spaces is to observe and emulate those '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men:

*I was pretty busy there [in socio-sexual spaces] to look at those 'Tian-Tsai' and observe how they look, the way they dress and the tactics with which they interact with others. For me, being there is just for learning, learning how to be a normal gay man so I can have my first boyfriend.*  
(Ren, 37 years old, follow-up interview)

Two critical points concerning accruing sexual capital emerge in this extract. Firstly, it shows that this accrual can be achieved not just through an individual's willingness to invest him/herself to enhance sexual desirability but, more importantly, by apprehending the hegemonic structure of desire. One has to identify what personal characteristics are advantageous for facilitating socio-sexual interactions with others before investing in enhancing one's sexual desirability. In Ren's case, since to him, '*Tian-Tsai*' represents the incarnation of gay men's hegemonic structure of desire, observing their physical appearances and interpersonal skills becomes a shortcut for him to identify how to be '*a more attractive or normal gay man*', which has previously perplexed him. The second

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<sup>52</sup> This obsession can be seen from preceding chapter (see 3.4.2), which at the first time we met, Ren requested me to guide him to every sort of socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok for experiencing different forms of sexual activities

point this case highlights is the connection between going to socio-sexual spaces and accruing sexual capital. Specifically, it is through physically being in these spaces that an individual can practically observe interpersonal interactions among gay men. He can then identify the '*Tian-Tsai*' and analyse what personal characteristics are advantageous for enhancing sexual desirability. Thus, visiting socio-sexual spaces is an important way for participants to learn and thereby accrue sexual capital.

However, as mentioned in previous chapters, the normalisations of sexual morality and sexual desirability lead the acts of visiting socio-sexual spaces in Taiwan to be either morally transgressive, or frustrated for many participants, which they have rarely done in their daily lives. Consequently, some participants only go to socio-sexual spaces when travelling to Bangkok since it is both a city with permissive liminality and an advantageous or democratic sexual field for them. Being in these spaces in Bangkok becomes morally appropriate and inclusive experiences for them. In this sense, engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok is indeed a suitable context for these participants to learn and then accrue sexual capital to be a more sexually attractive or at least 'normal' gay man.

I met Ren on his third visit to Bangkok, and discovered that he still cannot initiate socio-sexual interactions with others, which reveals two insights. First of all, it shows that identifying advantageous personal characteristics (namely sexual capital) through observing '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men does not lead to the accrual of sexual capital automatically. This is because the mechanism of learning sexual capital involves another crucial step, discussed in the following (see section 5.2.2). Secondly, Ren's circumstances also reveal that identifying sexual capital itself is not automatic but requires a corresponding competency, held by different men in different degrees.

This difference can be seen in the case of participant Kyle. Kyle is a closeted gay man who has very few experiences of visiting socio-sexual spaces. Like Ren, Kyle also claimed that he travelled to Bangkok for the sake of 'learning to be a gay man',



which indicated developing and practising sexual skills due to his being a virgin. The time we met was his first time travelling to Bangkok, but I found that no matter whether in the clubs or saunas, Kyle could always adapt to these spaces and soon had socio-sexual interactions with others. This contrasted with Ren's pace of learning sexual capital; a contrast that originates from the gap in their competencies in identifying sexual capital. Instead of just focusing on observing '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men as Ren did, Kyle could figure out particularly operational logic of socio-sexual interactions in socio-sexual spaces, which led him to accurately identify some other advantageous personal characteristics that can facilitate him to initiate these interactions. For instance, soon after we went to DJ Station together, Kyle detached from me and started to wander the club by himself. Later on, I observed that Kyle staggered in the club and into the arms of different men. In the follow-up interview, Kyle claimed it was because he noticed that in DJ Station, a gay man who is alone and seemingly drunk is more likely to be approached by other clubbers while he appears more 'vulnerable'. This led him to adopt specific behaviours including consciously detaching from companion and pretending to be drunk. His observations and adaptability were demonstrably effective, since Kyle had far more socio-sexual interactions in DJ Station than most of my other participants.

To further explore what resulted in Ren and Kyle's contrasting competencies in identifying sexual capital, the research elucidates that a fundamental factor is their past experiences. Although both of them rarely visit socio-sexual spaces in their daily lives, Kyle revealed that he indeed frequents some gay men's social venues (such as parties held in the resort, karaoke boxes or someone's house) and thus has quite a few experiences of having socio-sexual interaction with other gay men. These experiences develop his advanced learnt competency, meaning a better sensitivity in identifying advantageous sexual capital through gay men's personal interactions in addition to particular '*Tien-Tsai*'. In summary, the different degrees of and paces at adapting into socio-sexual spaces between Ren and Kyle illustrates that accruing sexual capital involves an individual's learnt competency. One of the crucial components of this competency is sensitivity when identifying sexual

capital, which relates to an individual's previous experiences of socio-sexual interactions.

### 5.2.2 The competency to imitate sexual capital

From the fieldwork, I noticed that the gap in learnt competency of sexual capital among participants also derives from their relative ability to imitate personal characteristics for the purposes of initiating socio-sexual interaction. This ability is also intimately associated with participants' previous experiences of going to socio-sexual spaces. To reiterate, after identifying what personal characteristics are advantageous, an individual then needs to transform this know-how into practice so that these personal characteristics can be indeed accrued as their sexual capital.

The contrasting experiences of two participants in go-go bars helps to clarify how this competency works. Hao and Du are friends who had travelled to Bangkok for the first time when we met. They travelled in a group of friends, led by another participant called Benny - an 'old hand' gay tourist who has been to Bangkok more than ten times. On the first night we met, Benny brought us to a go-go bar called 'Dream Boy'. When we entered, Benny ordered a go-go boy immediately and then initiated various forms of body contact, such as cuddling and kissing, which was, as he asserted in the follow-up interview, for the sake of teaching his companions how to 'have fun' in the go-go bar. After a while, Benny arranged for this boy to sit between Hao and Du and grabbed their hands to touch him. In the beginning, both were too shy to have unprompted interactions with the boy.

However, soon after that, the distinction between them emerged. While Hao started to whisper and hold hands with the boy, Du still did nothing but just sat there. The following day, when we went to another go-go bar, Hao already looked like an 'old-hand' who was able to independently handle the entire process from ordering the boy to initiating flirtation. In contrast, although Du ordered a boy as well, he still seemed to be awkward when interacting with him. However, later on the same night, when we went clubbing to DJ Station, the conditions reversed.

## Chapter 5 - Sexual Capital

Even though it was also his first time at this club, Du acted like he fitted in here since he can lip sync and dance to Western pop music with other clubbers. Conversely, Hao looked clumsy and restrained in DJ Station as most of the time he just stood there not interacting with others, in contrast to his confidence in go-go bars.

This case shows that even when an advantageous personal characteristic, here the interpersonal skill of flirting with go-go boys, is explicitly taught to them by Benny, Hao and Du were differentiated by how they could respond. That difference in pace taking up this skill was not due to their ability to identify advantageous sexual capital but their ability to imitate it. To elaborate, in contrast to Du's inaction and awkward manner, Hao imitated Benny's interpersonal skill and used it to flirt. This contrast exemplifies that Hao and Du accrued the sexual capital of interpersonal skill (flirting with go-go boys) at different paces since they possess differential learnt competency in terms of imitating the advantageous personal characteristics that they identified. I argue that this difference is due to their distinct experiences of frequenting given type of socio-sexual spaces in the past.

Hao reflected in interviews that he was able to imitate and use the interpersonal skill of flirting with go-go boys because he has worked in a grassroots gay bar in Taipei, which also involves intensive body contact with the clientele. Likewise, Du asserted that he could fit in in DJ Station, a socio-sexual space he had never been to, because he used to go clubbing in Taiwan frequently and so is familiar with elements of nightclub culture such as Western pop music and dancing. This familiarity enabled him to imitate and use the interpersonal skills of interacting with strangers on a mobile basis (as clubbers usually wander around DJ Station). Conversely, Hao seemed entirely out of place in DJ Station since both the Western pop music and mobile interacting pattern among clubbers are disparate to his previous experiences. That is, in Taiwan's grassroots bar, the clientele is usually passive, sitting in the same place and drinking or singing karaoke (mostly Taiwanese or Chinese songs). To sum up, this case illustrates that an individual's previous experiences in socio-sexual spaces influences their competences to adapt

and use particular personal characteristics (such as interpersonal skills), which generally influence the paces at which one imitates specific sexual capital.

These two cases exemplify how participants adapted in (the given) socio-sexual spaces at different paces partially because they possess different abilities to learn the right competences, namely identifying and imitating sexual capital. This competency gap illustrates that accruing sexual capital does not merely depend on an individual's willingness, but also involves a learning mechanism that includes, firstly, identifying advantageous personal characteristics and, secondly, imitating them as sexual capital in socio-sexual interactions practically. This learnt competency, I argue, represents an alternative form of sexual capital. Unlike personal characteristics such as physical appearance, which enhance an individual's sexual desirability through just possessing them, I found that other characteristics such as learnt competency play an infrastructural role in enhancing sexual desirability. Specifically, this 'infrastructural sexual capital' enhances an individual's sexual desirability indirectly through aiding him/her to accrue other types of sexual capital. This finding shows the multiplicity of connotations of sexual capital in terms of its 'function', hence illustrating that some personal characteristics that seem irrelevant to an individual's sexual desirability are in fact essential forms of constitutive sexual capital.

According to the cases of Kyle or Hao and Du, a gay man's 'infrastructural sexual capital', their competency to acquire a specific form of sexual capital, originates from their previous experiences of having socio-sexual interactions with others or being in specific kinds of socio-sexual spaces. The two cases above resonate with my observations of other participants, which suggested that the more of these socio-sexual spatial and interactional experiences a gay man has, the more efficiently he can learn these forms of sexual capital, by identifying and imitating advantageous personal characteristics in the future. This intertwined relationship between gay men's previous experiences and competences to learn sexual capital is manifested in the way that many 'old hand' participants quickly adapt to all kinds of socio-sexual spaces regardless of having been there previously and can initiate

socio-sexual interaction with others efficiently. This also explains why many gay Taiwanese men regard sex tourism to Bangkok as an important learning exercise in becoming an attractive or 'normal' gay man and hence repeatedly engage in it.

### **5.3 Enacting sexual capital: Self-esteem**

This section, through the empirical case of participant Rabbit's contrasting self-presentations in two different gay clubs, introduces another mechanism for enhancing sexual desirability. This mechanism illustrates that either possessing or accruing specific personal characteristics does not automatically lead to enhanced sexual desirability. Instead, this enhancement in some cases can be achieved only by enacting these characteristics to form an alignment with the others. As it will be shown later, the occurrence of this alignment relies on a gay man's self-evaluation of his sexual desirability, namely self-esteem. In essence, it unveils the insufficiency to have a variety of competences and attributes that articulate with a given field. Instead, it is also imperative for an individual to have the confidence and ability to put them into practice in that situation. Following this, the section will move onto explore the situational nature of this confidence and elucidate how it is transformed into a resilient self-esteem through engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok perpetually. This demonstrates that this tourism is indeed an essential approach for many gay Taiwanese men to construct their self-esteem in sexual desirability.

#### **5.3.1 The alignment of sexual capitals**

In respect to the way in which sexual capital enhances its possessor's sexual desirability, Green (2008a) firstly indicates this is through the possession of specific personal characteristics and argues that, more importantly, these characteristics need to be 'situationally enacted to articulate with the structure of desire' of specific sexual fields (Green 2008a, p.45). From his research on New York City's gay scene, Green noticed that some Black gay men consciously 'play up' their blackness, a racialised front as a masculine, edgy and threatening thug, to fit with

a specific eroticised fantasy within this White-dominated sexual field and hence enhance their sexual desirability (Green 2008a, p.37).

Nonetheless, from many cases in my fieldwork, I realized that participants did not or could not utilise their advantageous personal characteristics in ways that articulate with the specific sexual field they inhabit. Other cases showed that simply utilising singular or a few personal characteristics did not enhance a gay man's sexual desirability. These findings suggest that enhanced sexual desirability only occurs in particular conditions: specific characteristics and competences are necessary but not sufficient to achieve it. The following section further investigates under which conditions a gay man deploys specific personal characteristics and successfully enhances his sexual desirability.

The successful enactment of a gay man's personal characteristics to enhance his sexual desirability depends on them aligning with the others. This alignment is well-illustrated in a set of practices which participant Rabbit carried out in club FAKE. In terms of layout, FAKE is akin to a concert hall which has a main stage at the front and many small round tables scattered in the rest of the club. Generally, the majority of clubbers in FAKE are local gay Thai men who come in groups of friends. Each group usually occupies one table and mostly they only chat and drink with their friends within the confines of that table. This particular socio-spatial culture in FAKE makes each table look like an isolated island and patrons are less likely to have interactions with strangers who occupy another table. Therefore, many of my participants, even including some '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men, hardly ever had any socio-sexual interaction with other clubbers in FAKE. However, when clubbing with Rabbit in FAKE, I noticed that he succeeded in overcoming the segregated socio-spatial culture in this club through the alignment of his different personal characteristics, including spatial knowledge of FAKE, interpersonal skills and Han facial features. This alignment led these characteristics to be enacted as sexual capital and to enhance Rabbit's sexual desirability in this nightclub.

When we entered FAKE, Rabbit refused the staff's attempt to allocate us to a marginal table in the club.<sup>53</sup> Instead, he brought me to hang out in a nomadic pattern, namely wandering in the club without being stationed at a fixed location, which he explained is in order to encounter as many other clubbers as possible. Later on, when we kept moving from table to table, I observed that Rabbit tended to stroll and stare at other patrons who stood along the side of the aisle, which functioned as a passive and disembodied flirtation inviting them to approach him. The strategy Rabbit adopted, which combined a nomadic pattern (spatial knowledge) and 'flirting while walking'<sup>54</sup> (interpersonal skill), was demonstrably effective; many patrons initiated socio-sexual interactions to kiss, hug, touch and buy drinks for him along the way when he was moving around this nightclub. After we had wandered all over FAKE, Rabbit then abruptly climbed onto the main stage and danced with the professional go-go dancers who are hired by the club. In the follow-up interview, Rabbit explained that this seemingly abrupt action was another deliberate strategy he adopted to maximise his visibility to attract more clubbers to approach him. In his analysis, the location where he chose to stand on the stage is a doubly strategic location for attracting attention since not only it is the eye-catching 'high ground' of the club, but it is also on the way to the toilet with people passing by frequently. This strategy also seemed to work well as, after Rabbit jumped off the stage and back to the nomadic pattern of wandering in the club, many more clubbers tried to approach him than before.

This case, first of all, illustrates another form of sexual capital, the spatial knowledge, which has not been discussed in previous studies on sexual fields. It is Rabbit's previous experiences of FAKE that built up his familiarity with both the particular interactional pattern and socio-spatial culture of this nightclub. Through this spatial knowledge, he was able to develop and adopt particular strategies, which brought him many more opportunities to have socio-sexual

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<sup>53</sup> In explanations by other 'old-hand' participants', the tables located at the centre of FAKE are usually reserved for patrons who book them in advance. Thus, in my experiences, every time I came here with tourists, the staff always allocated us to a marginal table.

<sup>54</sup> This indicates deliberately strolling slowly and making eye-contact with others.

interactions than other participants in FAKE. Secondly, this example also shows personal characteristics being enacted as sexual capital, to some extent, in the premise of being in an alignment with other characteristics. For instance, Rabbit's spatial knowledge of wandering in a nomadic pattern in FAKE is valid for facilitating him to have more socio-sexual interactions only if he also exercised the interpersonal skill of 'flirting while walking' at the same time. The validity of this alignment is manifested in that, as I observed, most other participants who walked while looking straight ahead at a quick pace rarely had socio-sexual interactions here.

Likewise, the spatial knowledge of climbing onto the main stage and dancing on it that Rabbit exercised is effective in attracting other patrons only when combined with his Han facial features, which articulate with the structure of desire of FAKE due to Thailand's 'Eastern Asian orientation'. The necessity of this alignment between spatial knowledge and physical appearance in terms of enhancing a gay man's sexual desirability was proven in a repeated scenario in DJ Station. Many participants expressed their distastes for those they call '*old and stocky*' white men who danced on the main stage, of whom they commented '*They'd [the "old and stocky" white men] better get off the stage, it's not their place!*' This scenario reveals that when the physical appearance of a gay man does not articulate with the structure of desire of the given sexual field, the exercise of his spatial knowledge (dancing on the stage) to incite interest might fail. Similarly, physical appearance on its own can fail as sexual capital. For example, in FAKE I observed that some of the '*Tien-Tsai*' participants still failed to have any interpersonal interaction with other patrons. A crucial cause of this unusual disconnection between their physical attractiveness and sexual popularity is their lack of spatial knowledge of this club. This lack of knowledge led '*Tien-Tsai*' participants to accept the staff's allocation to the marginal tables, which circumscribed their ability to display their advantageous physical appearance and so resulted in them being ignored and having no socio-sexual interactions with other clubbers throughout the night. Rabbit's case in FAKE demonstrates that the enhancement in a gay man's sexual desirability relies on the alignment of his different forms of sexual capital as well



as the quantification of sexual capital he possesses or the degree to which his sexual capital portfolio articulates with the structure of desire.

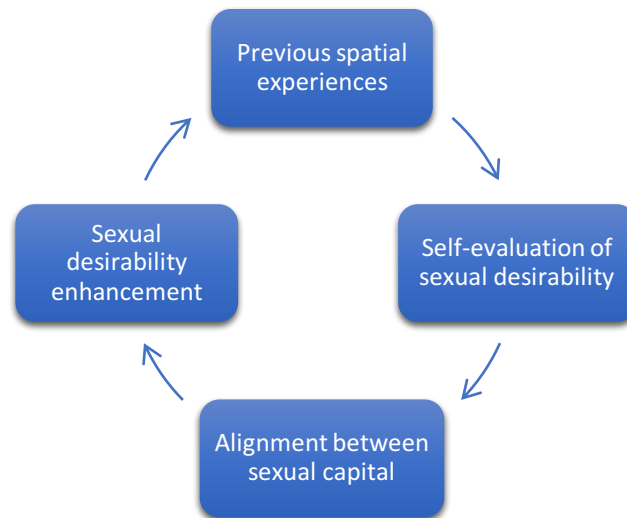
### **5.3.2 Self-esteem as the activator of the enactment of sexual capital**

The case, however, among Rabbit's contrasting experiences of being ignored by clubbers in DJ Station indicates that the alignment of a gay man's different forms of sexual capital does not always occur. I noticed that Rabbit's self-presentation in this club was far more withdrawn and reserved compared to FAKE. He generally avoided eye-contact and tended to stay in dark corners. Thus, even though Rabbit has both the interpersonal skill of making eye-contact and spatial knowledge of dancing on-stage, he chose to not to enact these in DJ Station. This decision, by Rabbit's own account, is because of his self-evaluation of physical appearance in this club. He repeatedly stated in our interview *'I'm not the type of DJ Station'*. Rabbit indicated that since DJ Station is far more international, so its patrons are gay men from all over the world, from this perspective he felt the advantage of his Han facial features is trivialised as 'Eastern Asian orientation' is not the hegemonic structure of desire in this club. Rabbit's recognition (sexual habitus) of DJ Station's structure of desire, as he reflected, originates from his previous experiences of being neglected by most of clubbers in this club. These experiences made him become in DJ Station to avoid *'disgracing [him]self'*, as he worried that nobody would respond to him as the way he solicited for attention in FAKE.

My observations of Rabbit concurred with his self-evaluation. In DJ Station, far fewer patrons approached him than in FAKE, which implied a downgrading of his sexual desirability between these two socio-sexual spaces. However, I noticed that this downgrade did not result only from these spaces being different sexual fields with Rabbit's physical appearance being evaluated differently. More importantly, Rabbit's reduced sexual desirability in DJ Station is associated with his withdrawn self-presentations, such as avoiding eye-contact with others or hiding himself in the least conspicuous areas of the club, which either misled other patrons to perceive that he had no interest in interacting with others or meant others failed

to see him. For example, many times in DJ Station, I found that other men were indeed looking at Rabbit, which is generally a hint of expressing sexual interest in club culture. However, they gave up approaching Rabbit eventually since he seemed to avoid their gaze, which is usually interpreted as an implicit signal of rejection. But, when I raised this in an interview with Rabbit it became clear he had no intention to reject the interest of other clubbers in DJ Station yet, instead, his avoidance of their gaze was simply because he was entirely unaware of them. In my understanding, this lack of awareness was intimately related to Rabbit's negative self-esteem in sexual desirability at DJ Station which made him fail to detect and then respond to sexual interest from others.

These examples show that gay men's tiers of sexual desirability partially rely on the alignment of different forms of sexual capital they possess. The activation of this alignment, as shown in Rabbit's contrasting self-presentations between FAKE and DJ Station, relates to his self-evaluations of sexual desirability in the given socio-sexual spaces, which were made on the basis of his previous experiences of these spaces. For instance, as Rabbit recalled, his positive self-esteem of believing he is sexually desirable in FAKE was because during the first time he went to the club an attractive go-go dancer invited him to climb on the stage to dance together. After this incident, many clubbers competed to approach him, which made him feel *'just like a superstar'*. With this positive experience, whenever Rabbit was in FAKE, he could activate an alignment among his different forms of sexual capital, such as interpersonal skills, spatial knowledge and physical appearance, to enhance his sexual desirability. This enhancement facilitated him to have many socio-sexual interactions with others in FAKE, which in turn acted back to cultivate his positive self-evaluation of sexual desirability. Summarising from above, this research proposes an interrelated circuit (see Figure 8):



**Figure 8: The circuit of sexual desirability enhancement**

As the figure indicates, previous experiences of being in the given socio-sexual space inform self-evaluations of sexual desirability in that space. This spatialised self-evaluation then determines whether the alignment among different forms of sexual capital occurs. The (in)activation of this alignment then leads to either enhancing or downgrading of sexual desirability, which shapes an individual's experiences of being in this socio-sexual space. These stages in this circuit firstly show that the fluctuation in a gay man's sexual desirability across different spaces is also related to his spatialised self-evaluation of sexual desirability. Secondly, it exemplifies a mechanism of enacting sexual capital that explains the particular conditions in which enactments of sexual capital occur and how they are exercised to enhance a gay man's sexual desirability. Lastly, according to this circuit a gay man's self-evaluation of sexual desirability is spatialised, some examples in the fieldwork revealed that this self-evaluation, though, especially the positive ones that participants made in the given socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok – may permeate other spaces and increase their self-esteem gradually.

One representative case is from participant Alex, a gay man who evaluated himself as '*not too handsome*'. However, after travelling to Bangkok for the first time and experiencing many gay Thai men approaching him actively in clubs such as DJ Station and GOD, he started to travel to Bangkok repeatedly, which formed a spiral

between his enhanced sexual desirability (in the given spaces) and his engagements in sex tourism (see 4.2.3). Exemplifying this spiral, Alex recalled that his self-esteem regarding his sexual desirability has risen correspondingly, and is no longer circumscribed to Bangkok because even in his regular clubbing experiences in Taiwan he feels more confident about himself. This confidence prompts Alex to be more active in terms of initiating socio-sexual interactions with strangers in Taiwan's clubs and hence have more sexual encounters than before. This demonstrates the connection between sex tourism to Bangkok and his overall enhanced sexual desirability in Taiwan. Resonating with this connection, Rabbit also claimed that his repeated engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok is not for the sake of sex itself but the experiences of being sexually desirable in given socio-sexual spaces such as Chakran (see 3.5.1 and 4.3.1) and FAKE, because these experiences are indispensable resources to him constructing and/or sustaining his sexual self-esteem. To sum up, these cases exemplify how some Taiwanese gay men engage in sex tourism to Bangkok to increase their self-esteem of sexual desirability, which then results in it being commonly enhanced in Taiwan.

### **5.3.3 The resilient self-esteem of sexual desirability**

The cases of some participants suggest that the fluctuations in self-evaluation of sexual desirability were in line with not just space but also situations. Participant A-Wan's experience in Sauna Mania (see 3.5.2) illustrates the situational nature of participants' self-evaluation of sexual desirability. In the interview, A-Wan reflected that when he was in Mania at first, many patrons touched him and even tried to have further private sexual interactions. This enhanced his self-evaluation of sexual desirability to a level that he had never experienced before. This enhancement then led A-Wan to become picky concerning choosing sexual partners and then rejected men during this time-span with whom he would ordinarily be willing to have sex. However, after a period of time, after some other patrons also pushed him away, A-Wan started to lose this newly built self-esteem in his sexual desirability:

*These acts of pushing made me so embarrassed and destroyed the self-esteem I just built up before, you know... It's like being awoken from a dream of being 'Tien-Tsai' and finding out I'm that still an inconspicuous guy. (A-Wan, 26 years old, follow-up interview)*

A-Wan's case showed that even in the same socio-sexual space of Mania, his self-evaluation still sharply fluctuated from time to time due to the socio-sexual interactions he was experiencing, which demonstrated its situational nature. Besides, this case suggests that A-Wan's standards for choosing sexual partners in Mania also fluctuated situationally, which linked to his self-evaluation of sexual desirability. The fluctuations in standards for choosing sexual partners, from my observations, namely evaluation of others' attractiveness and decision about whether to have socio-sexual interactions were inconsistent. For instance, it was not rare that some participants 'hooked up' with men they previously rejected, while in other cases they were also rejected by men who had just approached them.

Viewed from another perspective, while a gay man's self-evaluation in sexual desirability is associated with the experiences of socio-sexual interactions he has with others, it is usually situated at a constantly fluctuating state since other men's standards for choosing sexual partners are also situationally fluctuating and hence mean these experiences fluctuate correspondingly.<sup>55</sup> The degree of uncertainty this produces is considerable since a gay man's situationally fluctuating self-evaluation also makes his own standards fluctuate, which impacts on other men's inconsistent experiences of socio-sexual interactions. In turn, this results in their fluctuating self-evaluations as well as standards for choosing sexual partners, that feedback into other gay men's inconsistent experiences of socio-sexual interactions. Put differently, this interdependent relationship between a man's experiences of interacting with others, his self-evaluation of sexual desirability and standards for choosing sexual partners leads to a 'Domino effect' (see Figure 9). In turn, the

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<sup>55</sup> 'Fluctuating state' here indicates that both the quantity and 'quality' (meaning sexual desirability of those an individual interacts with) of people an individual interacts with are fluctuating.

fluctuation in his self-evaluation spreads to others and hence becomes a collective state of everyone coexisting in the same time-space.



**Figure 9: The ‘Domino effect’**

However, some cases during the fieldwork demonstrated that a gay man’s self-evaluation of sexual desirability is not always situational. I found that some participants, especially the ‘old hands’, could sustain their self-evaluations at the same level across different situations. This was the case even in some disadvantageous situations when they were overtly ignored or frequently rejected by other gay men to have socio-sexual interactions. This resulted from their ‘resilient self-esteem’, no matter what situations these ‘old hand’ participants confront, their sexual self-esteem usually reverted back to its original level, thereby enabling them to consistently enact the sexual capital they possess. By interviewing these participants, I ascertained that this resilience came mainly from their experiences of both frequently visiting and interacting with others in socio-sexual spaces. For example, when talking about his indiscriminate preference for socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok, participant Chris explained as follows:

*It’s just like after going to these spaces again and again, you’ll then realise that the occurrences of hook-ups are spontaneous without any rules. Thus, when nobody approaching you, it doesn’t mean you are not attractive, but because everything is changing, like the place and timing you were in, or other people’s tastes<sup>56</sup> and states<sup>57</sup>. (Chris, 34 years old, follow-up interview)*

<sup>56</sup> In interview, Chris further defined that the term ‘tastes’ indicates an individual’s different preferred types of men.

<sup>57</sup> In interview, Chris further defined that the term ‘states’ indicates an individual’s levels of either liminality (e.g. degree of drunkenness) or self-esteem in sexual desirability.

Similar narratives were repeatedly provided by different 'old hand' participants, which showed that their rich experiences of frequenting socio-sexual spaces, in part gained from their repeated engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok, led them to 'seeing through' the occurrences of socio-sexual interaction are contingent because they are determined by multiple factors rather than just an individual's sexual desirability. This 'seeing through' then made their self-evaluations of sexual desirability immune from fluctuation in socio-sexual interactions. Thus, I argue that the resilient self-esteem in sexual desirability is indeed another form of 'infrastructural sexual capital' as it also plays a role in leading a gay man to sustain their self-evaluations of sexual desirability at a high level. This enables the alignment of his different forms of sexual capital in most situations and thereby facilitates him to have more socio-sexual interactions than other gay men who do not possess this specific sexual capital.

To sum up, while this resilient self-esteem is built by participants' rich experiences of frequenting socio-sexual spaces and many of them go to these spaces exclusively when in Bangkok (see 5.2.1). This once again demonstrates that engaging in sex tourism to this city makes an overall enhancement in their sexual desirability, which is not limited when they travel to Bangkok but also permeates through their daily lives in Taiwan.

### **5.4 Performing sexual capital: Conspicuous interactions**

The third mechanism of enhancing sexual desirability is the sexual capital performance, which involves a distinct understanding of sexual desirability that originates from an alternative way of evaluating it. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a collective anxiety about lacking sexual desirability among gay Taiwanese men, which according to the fieldwork results from the precarious states of their tiers of sexual desirability. This precarity is because sexual desirability itself cannot be accurately evaluated. First, there are contradictory notions of gay men's sexual desirability. This contradiction is embodied in the fact

that there are both a hegemonic structure and plural structures of desire (see 4.4.3) coexisting in gay men's sexual sociality. On the one hand this leads to a rough consensus on the notion of sexual desirability, thereby making it evaluable and comparable. But, on the other hand, there are also nuanced definitions of sexual desirability that make it hard to be evaluated in a uniform standard and so it fluctuates across different situations. Second, sexual desirability cannot be accurately evaluated because it is composed of sexual capital, which cannot be quantified as economic capital nor certified by institutional authority as cultural capital.<sup>58</sup>

Because of this precarious feature of sexual desirability, I found that many of my participants turned to use other indicators to evaluate it. The most fundamental one is the number of socio-sexual interactions one has had or is having, since the general assumption is that the more sexually desirable a gay man is the more socio-sexual interactions he has. This assumption can be validated in the cases that '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men are normally surrounded by many men in socio-sexual spaces. However, from participants' accounts, it is also worth noting that each socio-sexual interaction, just like an individual's personal characteristics, signifies differential currencies concerning sexual desirability, which is in line with the people, spaces and activities involved in it. To reiterate, a gay man's sexual desirability can be evaluated by not only the '*quantity*' but also the '*quality*' of socio-sexual interactions he has experienced or is experiencing because each has distinct 'value-added' effects, just as sexual currency suggests his sexual desirability. Thus, socio-sexual interactions are not just indicators by which to evaluate sexual desirability but also an alternative form of sexual capital, the currency of which is determined by an alternative structure of desire (also a normalisation of sexual desirability in the performative perspective). Through this alternative set of understandings of sexual desirability, sexual capital and structures of desire, this section further

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<sup>58</sup> For instance, the qualification of an individual's cultural capital can be evaluated from the degree or certifications he/she possesses, which is conferred by authorised institutions such as universities or other educational organisations.



explores the association between sex tourism to Bangkok and participants' sexual desirability enhancement (both in Bangkok and in Taiwan).

### 5.4.1 Sexual interactions as indicators

It is notable participants' accounts shared a tight consensus about which different socio-sexual interactions conferred which differential 'sexual currencies' to the people whom engaging in them. They saw these sexual currencies working in three principle dimensions - people, space and activity - which will be explained in the following sections.

#### 5.4.1.1 People

In a general sense, a gay man's sexual desirability (and most importantly, their physical appearance) is evaluated by the people with whom he has socio-sexual interactions. As established in the previous chapter (see 4.1), there is a 'pecking order' within gay men's sexual sociality that they prefer to make friends and have romantic or sexual relationships with people who are at least equally desirable to them in a sexual sense. This pecking order in part recalls the principle of 'homogamy' that Bourdieu (1984) advances to elucidate the nature of marriage as assortative mating. Green appropriates this to argue that socio-sexual interactions among gay men also happen on the basis of the actors involved usually being located at similar or at least close tiers of sexual desirability (Green 2013).

During the fieldwork, I observed that the people with whom a gay man has socio-sexual interactions are also an important cause of the fluctuation in his sexual desirability. I term this process 'sexual desirability transfer'. That is, a gay man normally receives better evaluations of his sexual desirability from himself and others after he has socio-sexual interactions with those located as higher tiers of desirability in a general sense such as '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men. In line with the principle of homogamy, a given gay man's tier of sexual desirability will be relocated from a previously lower status onto a specific tier which is on par with or at least close to

the ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ men with whom he interacts. This relocation shows socio-sexual interaction is a channel through which sexual desirability is transferred.

An example illustrating this transferal process comes from a group of participants comprising Water, Gas, A-Wan and two other friends who travelled to Bangkok together. Among this group, Water is the so-called ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ gay man who is generally regarded as sexually desirable since his physical appearance to a large extent articulates with Taiwan’s hegemonic structure of desire. I observed that Water tended to be distant when interacting with his companions and me but except for Gas who is comparatively young and physically fit among the rest of this group. However, Water’s attitude toward his companions was reconfigured after we went clubbing to DJ Station. During that night out, an typically desirable and muscular Thai man initiatively approached me, then we talked, drank and danced together. Meanwhile, A-Wan flirted with a less conventionally attractive local man all night long, and Gas was taken home by a Singaporean who appeared to be in his late forties.

After the club closed, everyone but Gas ate at a food-stand outside of DJ Station, and Water started to comment on the men we had encountered. He firstly complimented me on the Thai man with whom I interacted and said ‘*You are really something*’. After that, Water expressed his surprise at Gas being ‘taken away’ by a man ‘*at such low level*’. At the same time, A-Wan complained about the Thai man he flirted with and emphasised ‘*I must be drunk then, so that gave him the chance to follow me, he’s really not good looking*’. The following day, Water rarely talked to Gas but started to talk enthusiastically with me more, repeatedly mentioning we shared many things in common and using ‘we’ in our conversations to emphasise this. For example, when I suggested going to FAKE the day after we went to DJ Station, Water replied that ‘*You know... It’s [FAKE] a very “advanced place”. Of course “we” can have fun there, but I think they [the rest of his companions] may not.*’

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Water's marked change in attitude toward interacting with Gas and me indicated two things. Firstly, it showed that the people with whom a gay man interacts actively enhances or lower his tier of sexual desirability. As Water acknowledged in interview, it was due to the Thai man's physical appearance that he reevaluated my sexual desirability as a similar, making him interact with me more intimately and enthusiastically. Conversely, Water consciously alienated Gas because he reevaluated him as '*not his same breed*'. This revaluation originated from Gas's socio-sexual interaction of being taken home by an elder man. Secondly, this case also demonstrates how sexual desirability was transferred to me positively, as well as from Gas negatively. Thus, our sexual desirability fluctuated in Water's evaluations in different directions.

### 5.4.1.2 Space and activity

The term 'advanced place', used by Water to describe FAKE in the quote above, indicated that this club's particular socio-spatial culture (see 5.3.1) and 'high quality' patrons, meant men who are less sexually desirable, like his companions, may rarely have opportunities to have socio-sexual interactions here. Water classified of FAKE as an 'advanced place' does not merely suggest the notion of the vertical stratification among socio-sexual spaces aforementioned (see 4.3.3) but further illustrates the mutually referential relationship between this stratification of spaces and gay men's tiers of sexual desirability. That is, a particular space's class within this stratification mainly depends on the 'quality' regarding sexual desirability of its clientele. And vice versa, a gay men's tier of sexual desirability is also determined by the socio-sexual spaces where he frequents and fits into. Following this logic, people who frequent Heaven are usually labelled as sexually undesirable since this sauna is mostly populated by older (middle-aged) and less physically fit gay men. To sum up, because of this mutually referential relationship between the class of a given socio-sexual space and the average level of its clientele's sexual desirability, many participants also regard the socio-sexual space where a gay man frequents as another reliable indicator to evaluate his sexual desirability.

Moreover, this vertical stratification among socio-sexual spaces originates not just from the 'quality' of clientele but also the types of sexual activity involved in these spaces. For instance, the majority of participants tended to regard erotic massage parlours as 'lower-class' spaces than clubs or saunas. In general, most of the socio-sexual interactions in erotic massage parlours are on the basis of monetary transactions, which implies that clients of this kind of space usually lack the sexual desirability to interact with others on the basis of mutual desire. Therefore, other than people and spaces, the type of activity in which a gay man engages while having socio-sexual interactions with others is another fundamental indicator by which evaluate his sexual desirability. Another dimension is the degree of intimacy the activity involves. As participant Egg asserted, having a chat with 'Tien-Tsai' gay men in the club is always good but, in his words, *'It would be more worthy to show-off if he fucked me'*. This assertion revealed that, comparing two different types of socio-sexual interaction with 'Tien-Tsai' gay men, having sex is more valuable than just talking in terms of enhancing a gay man's sexual desirability. This is because the former involves a higher degree of intimacy and hence implies a higher degree of mutual desire, suggesting superior sexual desirability.

### 5.4.1.3 Situationalised evaluation

In practice, evaluating a gay man's sexual desirability through socio-sexual interactions he has experienced or is experiencing is generally on a situational basis, which has to synthetically consider different indicators involve in, include people, space and activity. Because the sexual currency of a given sexual practice is co-determined by these indicators. For example, experiences of having socio-sexual interactions with sexually desirable men do not always lead participants to evaluate themselves at higher tiers of sexual desirability since, in many cases, they found out that these men were actually 'moneyboys'<sup>59</sup>. As participant Pony

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<sup>59</sup> Moneyboy is a form of male sex worker in Thailand, which they usually appear in different forms of socio-sexual spaces such as club or sauna without disclosing their identity at the beginning when they interact with potential clients.

asserted, being approached by handsome ‘moneyboys’ in the club was indeed an insult that resulted in a downgrade of his self-evaluation of sexual desirability since he believed that such people tend to target sexually undesirable gay men who are unable to ‘hook-up’ with others in mutually-desired conditions. This case demonstrates that the sexual currency of the sexual practice of interacting with sexually desirable people is indeed co-determined by the type of activity it involves.

Likewise, the sexual currency of a given socio-sexual interaction also lies in where it takes place as well as the nature of it. Participant Gun mentioned his experience of being invited for dinner by a Chinese architect after they had sex in Sauna Mania led to a notable enhancement in his sexual desirability in his friends’ evaluations as they now all view him as a ‘*heart-throb*’. In this case, the sexual currency of having dinner with the sexual partner does not originate from this activity as it is an ordinary social interaction, but is closely related to the space in which this interaction initiated. Specifically, it is due to gay sauna being typically viewed as a space for impersonal sex where most patrons follow an implicit principle of ‘fuck and go’, so further personal interactions with sexual partners are rarely developed in this space. Because of this interactional principle, having dinner together after having sex in a gay sauna becomes an unusual socio-sexual interaction which implies Gun’s superior sexual desirability as the motivator of the dinner invitation. This case exemplifies how the sexual currency an activity confers to a particular socio-sexual interaction is also co-determined by the space in which the interaction occurs.

To summarise, these cases illustrate that socio-sexual interactions are commonly used as the indicator to evaluate a gay man’s sexual desirability. This constitutes an alternative evaluating system, or structure of desire. These cases also show that each interaction does not count equally as its sexual currency is co-determined by the people, space and activity involved.

### 5.4.2 Conspicuous interactions as sexual capital

While socio-sexual interactions are used to evaluate a gay man's sexual desirability, it is also the case that these interactions are an essential resource composing it. For instance, in Gun's case, his (image of) sexual desirability to some extent is both evaluated by and composed of his interaction of having dinner with the Chinese architect he met in Sauna Mania. Thus, socio-sexual interactions – exclusively ones with high sexual currency that represent an individual's superior sexual desirability, which I termed 'conspicuous interactions' – are indeed an alternative form of sexual capital. Following this perspective, a gay man's sexual desirability is thereby not just an entity constituted by an assemblage of personal characteristics but, viewed through a Butlerian lens of performativity (Butler 1990), it is constructed through a set of repetitive performances in which one persistently carries out specific 'conspicuous interactions' and avoids other stigmatised ones.

This performative understanding of sexual capital and sexual desirability advances two critical insights into gay Taiwanese men's engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok. Firstly, it shows that they repeatedly travel to Bangkok and its socio-sexual spaces for the sake of having (the experiences of) these 'conspicuous interactions' to create their sexually desirable images, which again demonstrates that engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok is an important approach for many gay Taiwanese men to accrue sexual capital and enhance their sexual desirability. Secondly, it also makes sense of gay Taiwanese men's sexual practices of frequenting to particular socio-sexual spaces when they travelled to Bangkok, arguing that these practices are carried out to present and even create their sexually desirable images. Viewed from this perspective, the alternative structure of desire which uses socio-sexual interactions as an indicator of sexual desirability is also a particular code of acts (sexual habitus). It orients and disciplines a gay man's sexual practices of interacting with specific kinds of people, frequenting specific socio-sexual spaces and engaging in specific types of activity, which to some extent constitutes another normalisation of categories of sexual desirability of gay men in a performative sense.

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This code of acts was embodied in three cases in the fieldwork that concerned many participants' sexual practices. In the example of A-Wan's flirtation with an overweight Thai man in DJ Station, although he rejected his invitation to '*get a room to have sex*' and repeatedly criticised his physical appearance, they still kept in touch intensively through social media. When following A-Wan, I notice that he frequently chatted with the man via Facebook Messenger. Furthermore, they also arranged to meet again in DJ Station, contradicting the criticisms he had made beforehand. In our interview, A-Wan confessed that, in fact, he was falling in love with this man but also expressed particular concerns about how this might be perceived: '*To be honest, I worried that he is not handsome enough and made you guys think I'm a low-class and easy person. So, I asserted to you guys that he's ugly and not my type.*' This confession revealed that the worry of a potential 'sexual desirability transfer' through interacting with a sexually undesirable man to some extent motivated A-Wan's criticisms of the man's physical appearance and rejection of further interactions with him. These practices were indeed performances he conducted for the sake of preventing his image of sexual desirability from being jeopardised.

Likewise, this code of acts also motivated these gay men to frequent particular socio-sexual spaces as well as engage in specific sexual activities. For instance, participant Joe revealed that although he is already in his early fifties and is usually ignored by other patrons in most of Bangkok's gay saunas, he still resists going to Heaven:

*No, I would have never gone to this place [Heaven]. People there are old and fat, being there seems like declaring that I am part of them, that's really shameful. I'd rather go to Mania even if I may be very likely to be ignored, but at least it [being in Mania] shows that I'm still a "normal" gay man. (Joe, 51 years old, follow-up interview)*

Joe's narration disclosed that there is a label of '*the place for old and fat guys*' attached to Heaven because it is usually populated by these types of gay men. It is

this label that formed Joe's resistance since he was afraid of being viewed as the 'same breed' as this sauna's patrons, which he believes will jeopardise his image of sexual desirability. Viewed from this perspective, Joe's sexual practice of consciously resisting going to specific socio-sexual spaces is also a performance aimed to create and maintain a sexually desirable image. Moreover, some participants' avoidance of engaging in prostitution was not because they have no desire to buy sex or were concerned about the moral implications. Instead, this is due to considerations of the effect this sexual transaction might have on their images of sexual desirability. As participant Bee asserted,

*Only people who are not attractive have to buy sex. I would never do that because I don't need to and I don't want to be misunderstood as that kind of person. I'm able to hook-up without paying anything. (Bee, 30 years old, follow-up interview)*

In light of this assertion, refraining from engaging in specific types of sexual activity such as prostitution also functions as another form of performance to create a gay man's sexually desirable image. These three cases show that this performative structure of desire functions as the code of acts which orientates and disciplines a gay man's sexual practices in terms of not just people with whom he (does not) interact nor space where he (does not) frequent, but sexual activities in which he (does not) engage. Thus, many of these socio-interactions are indeed the 'products' of this structure of desire. These cases also illustrate, since socio-sexual interactions function as a form of sexual capital, that many gay men's sexual practices of (not) carrying out these interactions are thereby detached from their physical desire. They tend to instrumentalise these practices to create their sexually desirable image. For these gay men, in considering whether to carry out specific sexual practices, the intention to enhance (and sustain) their sexual desirability is usually more important than just fulfilling physical desires.

This consideration can be seen in participant Rabbit's experiences. I observed that in the saunas he tended to just flirt with many 'Tien-Tsai' gay men through



cuddling and fondling, but rarely followed them to 'the dark room' for anal sex. When I raised this observation in our interview, Rabbit claimed that for him interacting with '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men is for nothing but collecting '*sufficient pieces of evidence*' to perform that he is still 'hot', so having sex with them is unnecessary. In his words, since these '*pieces of evidence*' have their own '*storage life*', he has to engage in sex tourism to Bangkok regularly to 'refresh' them and sustain his sexually desirable image. Rabbit's claim exemplified the detachment between some gay men's sexual practices and their physical desires, since socio-sexual interactions with '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men are instrumentalised as the 'evidence' of his sexual desirability, namely sexual capital.

Furthermore, whilst particular socio-sexual interactions such as these are a kind of sexual capital, Rabbit's case also suggests that gay Taiwanese men's sex tourism to Bangkok resembles a stage which offers them chances to carry out specific sexual practices that can be turned into 'conspicuous interactions' and hence accumulated as their sexual capital. Thus, engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok is an important approach for gay Taiwanese men to experience 'conspicuous interactions' to create image of and thus enhance sexual desirability.

### **5.4.3 Performing sexual desirability: Doing, showing-off and comparing**

Following Rabbit's case of 'collecting evidence', in interview he further pointed out that his 'conspicuous interactions' with '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men are more 'valuable' in enhancing his sexually desirability image if his friends witness them. Because friends might also circulate stories of his 'conspicuous interactions' to broader audiences, which is an exceptionally effective approach to create his sexually desirable image. In fact, Rabbit was mentioned to me in an earlier interview with his friend Pat who represented Rabbit's stories of 'becoming a superstar' in FAKE when they travelled to Bangkok together, so I asked Pat to introduce us.

Generally speaking, however, most of the ‘conspicuous interactions’ occur in private, in temporally and spatially circumscribed time-spaces, which usually cannot be witnessed by friends. Thus, a gay man’s experiences of having ‘conspicuous interactions’ cannot always be circulated to a broad circle of audiences through their friends. A crucial prerequisite for socio-sexual interactions working as sexual capital is that they are known by others broadly. Nevertheless, these interactions can rarely be witnessed, so that a gay man cannot enhance his sexual desirability through simply having them. Instead, as many participants explained in the fieldwork, they generally played the role of ‘self-media’ to represent experiences of their ‘conspicuous interactions’. In light of the fieldwork, I found that this representation, namely the mechanism of performing sexual capital, was mainly embodied in two approaches: showing off personal ‘conspicuous experiences’ and comparing them to others.

### 5.4.3.1. Showing-off

Showing off is intimately related to an extraordinary phenomenon that many participants enjoyed disclosing their personal experiences of socio-sexual interactions, which are usually viewed as private, to their friends or in interview. I argue that these disclosures are not simply information exchanges but also the deliberate showing off of their sexual desirability.

First, this is because of the timing in which these disclosures occurred. Participants shared these experiences of socio-sexual interactions out of context, regardless of the topic of conversation, in a forced way. For example, in the case of Gun’s encounter with the Chinese architect in Sauna Mania, he mentioned this experience when we were talking about the possibility of developing intimacy in gay clubs, and he claimed that the intimacy was more likely occur in the sauna. However, he then asserted that in this encounter the Chinese architect fell in love with him, while he just viewed their relationship as casual sex. In this case, Gun’s experiences of receiving a dinner invitation from Sauna Mania was relevant to neither the space (club) nor the type of relationship (intimacy) that we were

discussing. This demonstrated that his intentions in sharing this experience were not in order to participate in the conversation at hand but to perform or 'show off' his sexual desirability.

Secondly, participants also shared many unnecessary details, serving only to highlight their superior sexual desirability. Also in Gun's instance, he repeatedly mentioned this man's attractiveness (youth and physical fitness) and occupation (architect). He also emphasised that this man initiatively invited him to have dinner at '*an exclusive restaurant*' and then paid for it. All of these details about the men's physical appearance, occupation and generousness were not really relevant to our conversation about intimacy but functioned to enable Gun to show off, a mechanism of performing sexual capital (conspicuous interaction) which effectively performed that his sexual desirability is worth an expensive dinner with an attractive man.

Thirdly, participants also offered highly exaggerated and biased depictions of sexual experiences. Egg confessed that the only thing worth sharing with friends after clubbing is interactions with '*Tien-Tsai*' men. He said that he would glamourise '*Tien-Tsai*' men's physical appearances to be more desirable than they were in reality and also misrepresent that the interactions were initiated by '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men approaching him.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, concerning the experiences of being accosted by, in his words, 'old and ugly'<sup>61</sup> men, Egg claimed that '*it's better not to mention*' since his friends will '*make fun of these experiences*'. This implies that disclosing socio-sexual interactions with sexually undesirable men will jeopardise his sexually desirable image. Egg's confession epitomises that gay men's disclosure of experiences of socio-sexual interaction are not always faithful to reality, but

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<sup>60</sup> But in fact, Egg said he normally initiated these interactions and was rejected frequently. Moreover, according to participants' accounts, it matters who initiates because they believe that the initiated is usually located in higher tiers of sexual desirability, motivating the initiator.

<sup>61</sup> When I asked Egg to further define the term 'ugly', he replied '*I think you understand, just "that kind of person", fat, sissy and those far from what we think are handsome.*'

often overly glamourised and represented in a biased fashion to create their image as a sexually desirable man.

In fact, I found that showing-off as a tactic to enacts the ‘conspicuous interactions’ a gay man has experienced and thus enhances his sexual desirability, which constitutes part of the sexual capital performing mechanism mainly embodied in two aspects. Firstly, Gun stated that his story caused many of his friends to be jealous, which he believed thereby led them to reevaluate his sexual desirability. This belief revealed an enhancement in Gun’s sexual desirability in the aspect of self-evaluation, which encouraged him to show off similar experiences in the conversations frequently. Additionally, the enhancement in sexual desirability resulting from showing off also manifests itself in others’ evaluations. In interviews with Egg’s friends<sup>62</sup>, they mentioned that their evaluations of Egg’s sexual desirability changed after he disclosed experiences with ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ gay men both orally<sup>63</sup> and visually<sup>64</sup>. Kat, one of his friends, mentioned he felt that ‘*Egg looked more handsome than before [travelling to Bangkok], especially because he had so many love affairs*’.

### 5.4.3.2 Comparing

The mechanism of performing sexual capital is exhibited in another peculiar phenomenon among participants where they frequently compared their experiences of socio-sexual interactions, with friends, especially when they travelled to Bangkok and went to the specific socio-sexual spaces together. A representative case of this comparison is participants Egg and Charlie’s adventure

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<sup>62</sup> These friends travelled to Bangkok with Egg in the big group but did not go clubbing since they prefer other non-gay activities. They did not witness Egg’s experience of socio-sexual interactions with ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ gay men, but just heard this from him secondhand.

<sup>63</sup> Indicating Egg’s descriptions of his encounter with ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ gay men in the club.

<sup>64</sup> Indicating Egg showing his selfies with the ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ gay men he interacted with. These visual representations are indeed another form of showing-off as ‘exchanging social media accounts’ itself is a highly intimate activity. And interestingly, due to the prevalent ‘flattering photo’ culture among Thai gay men, in which they tend to make lots of adjustments to their photos to prettify themselves after shooting, the photo of these ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ gay men that Egg showed to his friends were accidentally in line with his exaggerative descriptions of their physical appearances, which made him more convincing.

to the erotic massage parlour, HERO, on which I accompanied them. On the way to HERO, I briefly introduced them to the general service process of erotic massage and indicated that certain interactions, such as showering with the masseur, are not compulsorily included in the service. When Egg asked why these interactions were excluded from the erotic massage service, according to my understanding at that time, I replied that it perhaps depends on masseurs' sexual interest in each client they serve, which means the more sexually desirable he is, the more services they are willing to provide.<sup>65</sup> This conversation ended in Charlie's immediate response: *'OMG, then it would be super embarrassing if you [Egg] received these services but I didn't.'*

After visiting this parlour, the three of us decided to take a break at a café nearby, and they started to talk about their experiences in HERO. Initially, Charlie seemed to be delighted as he shared that the masseur had given him a 'French kiss'. However, Egg revealed that he and his masseur not only had a 'French kiss' but also took a shower together, which is a service Charlie did not receive. After this, I observed a subtle emotional shift between them. Charlie seemed deflated but Egg smiled even more widely. This observation was confirmed when I interviewed them respectively. Egg claimed that although he was not really into taking a shower with others, this interaction still pleased him as it brought him a sense of superiority regarding sexual desirability since, in his words, *'not everyone can get it'*. Conversely, Charlie pointed out that he was disappointed to learn that he did not receive this service and Egg did, because it led him to perceive himself as less sexually desirable where previously he had considered them equals in this respect.

Egg and Charlie's comparisons showed that the sexual currency of each socio-sexual interaction is conferred by comparing with others' experiences as well as the situation in which it occurred. To take the 'French kiss' as an example, it is usually regarded as a form of 'conspicuous interaction' in the situation of prostitution since

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<sup>65</sup> In line with the progress of the fieldwork, I found the reason that masseurs provide different services to different patrons is more complicated than their sexual interest on clients, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

this interaction is highly intimate and sex workers are usually reluctant to do this unless they consider the client attractive.<sup>66</sup> However, in this case, the sexual currency of this interaction seemed to be decreased because Charlie's experience of it did not enhance his sexual desirability since Egg also had this interaction. It was also through the act of comparison that each acknowledged the rarity of 'taking a shower together' in erotic massage services, which then increased the sexual currency of this interaction from something that Egg is '*not really into*' to a 'conspicuous interaction' that represents his superior desirability.

Furthermore, this case demonstrates that the act of comparing experiences of socio-sexual interaction enacted these interactions as sexual capital and then enhanced the actors' sexual desirability. To elaborate, it is by means of comparing that Egg and Charlie identified not only the sexual currency of each socio-sexual interaction but also which of them experienced 'conspicuous interactions'. These identifications led them to reevaluate the relativity of their tiers of desirability, and consensus switched from their being equals to Egg being more desirable because he experienced the 'conspicuous interaction'. So, it is through comparing experiences of socio-sexual interaction that the sexual currency of these given interactions is both conferred and enacted. This leads gay men who experience 'conspicuous interactions' to create a sexually desirable image, which demonstrates that this act (comparing) is another important way to perform sexual capital in order to enhance sexual desirability.

### 5.4.4 Negative consequences of sexual capital performance

In the context that a gay man's sexual desirability is a malleable image composed of repetitive performances of undertaking showing off, comparing socio-sexual interactions he is experiencing or has experienced, I found that this results in three

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<sup>66</sup> Indicating the patrons are either sexually desirable or capable of paying more tips, leading sex workers to engage in particularly intimate interactions.

negative consequences of the sexual-sociality among gay men as well as their well-being.

### 5.4.4.1 Risky interactions

In interviews, many participants expressed that socio-sexual spaces of and even their entire trips to Bangkok were like a battlefield for gay men to compete for sexual desirability. Therefore, when travelling to Bangkok, each was always in the situation of evaluating others and being evaluated by them through the indicators of socio-sexual interactions. This situation made many participants express that they were in a highly stressed state when interacting with other gay men, since all of these interactions create their images of sexual desirability in others' evaluations. This stress in some cases resulted in reckless attitudes towards engaging in particularly risky socio-sexual interactions which threatened participants' personal safety.

Participant Joe shared his experience of this stress when clubbing with friends in Bangkok, likening it to a battlefield based on the number and the physical appearance of men with whom they 'hook up' during the night out. He asserted that *'It would be very embarrassing to be a wallflower in front of friends, particularly when all of them [his friends] successfully got a men'*, because this implies the lack of sexual desirability. This potential embarrassment then heightened Joe's stress not wanting to *'lose this competition'*, which in turn coerced him to be more aggressive and sometimes even reckless in approaching other clubbers for further socio-sexual interactions even if he lacked interest in them, since *'It's better than having nothing'*.

However, this reckless attitude also resulted in Joe being in risky situations. Joe recalled that one time in DJ Station, while all of his friends had already found their sexual partners, Joe then accepted a sexual invitation from a normal-looking Thai man because he did not want to *'lose face'*. This was despite the fact that the man was not Joe's 'type' and lived in a distant district with which Joe was unfamiliar. As

Joe recalled, when just arrived at this man's house, he regretted having sex with the man and proposed to leave. The man became angry, refused Joe's wish to leave and also threatened to call his friends to rape Joe. Fortunately, this man fell asleep soon after due to intoxication, but Joe did not leave his house until early morning since there are no taxis or public transportation in this area at night. In this context where socio-sexual interactions indicate sexual desirability, many find interactions stressful. This results in reckless involvement in risky situations, some of which may result in sexual violence or other threats to their personal safety.

### 5.4.4.2 The anxiety about sexual desirability deficiency

As discussed in section 5.4.2, conspicuous interactions are a form of sexual capital that enhance a gay man's sexual desirability through the specific mechanism of performing them, but such performances are a double-edged sword. While they can enhance one's sexual desirability, they can also downgrade it. This is another cause of the collective anxiety about lacking sexual desirability among gay Taiwanese men. Engaging in 'stigmatised' socio-sexual interactions, such as prostitution, will jeopardise one's image of sexual desirability and, in comparisons with others, one risks being the 'loser', as the case of Egg and Charlie shows.

In terms of showing off, though it perhaps enhances the sexual desirability of the person who perform conspicuous interaction, participant observations suggested that the content of these performances are usually hyperbolic representations of socio-sexual interactions, which might mislead others to devalue their own sexual desirability. From my observations, this self-devaluation of sexual desirability in turn would motivate others to work harder to produce and show-off their 'conspicuous interactions' to compensate for this perceived sexual desirability deficiency. For example, participant David revealed that whenever his friends shared experiences with attractive men in Bangkok, his anxiety would exacerbate: *'I will start to think that I am really awful since it seems like everyone has wonderful experiences, fucking handsome guys, having countless dates. But it's only me who has never had that.'* However, after travelling with David to Bangkok, I met him



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and his friends in a casual gathering in Taiwan and found out that he also enjoyed 'sharing' his experiences of being bought drinks in DJ Station by a Thai man. When sharing this, David emphasised to his friends that this man was '*the most handsome one at that club*', which was slightly different from my observation through the lens of Taiwanese notions of sexual desirability. David's showing off, in turn, might then result in his friends' anxiety about their own deficiency.

David's case suggests that his friends' repeated showing off resulted in his anxiety of lacking sexual desirability and led him to imitate their behaviour to relieve this anxiety, thus impressing the anxiety upon others and supporting this cycle. Therefore, gay men involved in this sexual capital performing mechanism of showing off in part share a collective anxiety about their sexual desirability deficiency. They are both inflicting the anxiety and victims of it, so showing off becomes an everyday practice performed in daily conversations with others.

### 5.4.4.3 Interpersonal alienation

Lastly, socio-sexual interactions as a form of sexual capital also lead to interpersonal alienation among gay men, which is embodied in the phenomenon of 'intimacy devaluation' and 'dual-exclusion' in socio-sexual spaces. As the case above demonstrates, some gay men just used the socio-sexual interactions as the sexual capital and perform them to construct their sexually desirable image. Rabbit's flirtations with '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men in Sauna Chakran and Joe's acceptance of a sexual invitation from a Thai man are examples of this performance of sexual desirability. This use of socio-sexual interactions devalued the intimacy normally involved in them. Considered from this perspective, some gay men interact with others no longer simply out of physical desires but mixing with considerations of either creating or sustaining their sexually desirable images. This devaluation of intimacy is reflected in some participants' complaints about socio-sexual interactions in many socio-sexual spaces being, summarising from their words: '*shallow, cheap, insincere and lacking authentic affectionate ties*'. People with whom they once interacted passionately usually became strangers and never

contacted them again afterwards. As participant Benny claimed, *'Don't be silly, there is no serious relationship in these kind of places, everyone just treats each other as disposable tableware – use and then throw it.'*

Moreover, this interpersonal alienation can be seen in some other participants' frustrated experiences of being excluded from having neither sexual nor basic social interactions, such as ordinary conversations and even eye-contact with others. As participant Wei asserted, gay men in socio-sexual spaces, no matter whether in Taiwan or Bangkok, generally treated him *'as if [he does] not exist there'*. This dual-exclusion can be explained with reference to other participants' narrations, in which they divulged their inclinations to avoid having social and/or sexual interaction with sexually undesirable gay men due to the concern of 'sexual desirability transfer' (see 5.4.1). That is to say, interacting with a far less sexually desirable stranger will potentially damage a gay man's image of sexual desirability as others may regard them and this stranger as 'the same breed'. Thus, these participants believe that keeping distance from sexually undesirable men is an important way to sustain their image of sexual desirability. It is because of this interpersonal alienation in socio-sexual spaces like clubs and saunas that some participants are pushed to engage in erotic massage to fulfil their needs for more intimate and 'authentic' socio-sexual interactions with others, which the next chapter will explore in greater depth (see 6.3).

### 5.5 Conclusion

As many participants stated, they engage in sex tourism to Bangkok for the sake of 'becoming' an attractive or at least 'normal' gay man. According to the scholars who appropriate the Bourdieusian theoretical lens, individuals' sexual desirability is composed of sexual capital, which is an assemblage of their personal characteristics. In their understandings, then, individuals can enhance their sexual desirability by means of possessing these personal characteristics, either through a process of learning them (Hakim 2011a) or accessing specific sexual fields which articulate with their sexual capital portfolio (Green 2008a, 2014a).

However, this chapter has offered a re-exploration of the relationship between sexual desirability and sexual capital, providing evidence that instead of merely possessing sexual capital, the enhancement in sexual desirability involves three different mechanisms of accruing this capital. First of all, in line with Hakim (2011a), sexual desirability enhancement occurs through acquiring sexual capital, which can be achieved by an individual's willingness to learn it. However, cases of participants' different degrees and paces of adapting into socio-sexual spaces revealed that learning sexual capital indeed involves a specific learning mechanism of identifying and then imitating the sexual capital that is advantageous for facilitating socio-sexual interactions, the operation of which requires a correspondent learnt competency.

The fieldwork also showed that an individual's sexual desirability would not always be enhanced automatically in specific sexual fields. As Green (2014a) argues, the personal characteristics a gay man possesses can be turned into sexual capital not only because they match with the structure of desire but also because they are in alignment with others. The activation of this alignment usually relied on a gay man's self-evaluation of his sexual desirability, which is associated with the socio-sexual interactions he is experiencing or has experienced. This circuit of 'experiences of socio-sexual interactions → alignment among sexual capitals → sexual desirability enhancement' exemplifies the sexual capital enacting mechanism. However, as illustrated in participant A-Wan's case in Sauna Mania, a gay man's self-evaluation is situational in that it fluctuates in line with the socio-sexual interactions he is experiencing, so that some of my participants were unable to enact their sexual capital across different situations equally. At the same time, I found that some 'old hand' participants had developed 'resilient self-esteem' through their rich experiences of engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok. Therefore, even in disadvantageous situations such as being ignored or rejected by other gay men, these participants were able to revert to their original self-evaluation of sexual desirability. This enables them to enact their sexual capital steadily, which

made them generally better adapted in socio-sexual spaces than other gay men located at similar or even higher tiers of sexual desirability.

Lastly, sexual desirability is also enhanced through a mechanism of performing sexual capital. Where sexual desirability cannot be evaluated in the unified and accurate way, the fieldwork found that the socio-sexual interactions include with whom, at where and engaging in what sexual activities, which a gay man is experiencing and has experienced, become an important indicator of his sexual desirability. This finding also showed that each socio-sexual interaction confers different sexual currency on its actors' sexual desirability due to the specific situation in which it occurs. Thus, a gay man's sexual desirability is not just an essential entity that is composed of his personal characteristics, as current research asserts, but also a malleable image in the Butlerian sense of performativity, which is created through repetitively performing those 'conspicuous interactions'. Sexual desirability performance includes undertaking particular conspicuous interactions or showing off and comparing experiences of them with other gay men to either create or sustain a sexually desirable image.

By illuminating the association between sex tourism to Bangkok and three mechanisms of sexual capital accrual, this chapter also offers some alternative understandings of the concept of sexual capital which sheds new light on current studies of this topic. First of all, in the mechanisms of learning and enacting sexual capital, the research finds that two personal characteristics, learnt competency and resilient self-esteem, seemingly irrelevant to sexual desirability, do indeed play an infrastructural role in aiding a gay man to accrue or enact sexual capital and hence enhance their sexual desirability. I term this 'infrastructural sexual capital'. The existence of 'infrastructural sexual capital' demonstrates that sexual capital is not always a 'situational growth' of the sexual field as Green (2013) claims. Instead, it can also be a portable personal asset which universally applies across different situations as Hakim (2011a) argues. Besides, in the mechanism of performing sexual capital, a gay man's sexual desirability is also enhanced through repetitive

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performances of his experiences of conspicuous interactions, which illustrates that these interactions are another form of sexual capital.

From its alternative understandings of sexual capital, this chapter also proposes a rethink of the relationship between sex tourism and sexual desirability. Some participants' narrations of aiming to be/become a 'sexually desirable' gay man through engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok suggested that, for them, travelling abroad does not enhance their sexual desirability only temporarily through accessing sexual fields which differs from daily life. Conversely, this tourism enables them to accumulate socio-sexual, spatial and interactional experiences, which thereby lead to the more enduring and overall enhancement in their sexual desirability in everyday life. As a form of sexual capital, these experiences can be performed through either showing off or comparing with others. In this way they continue to enhance a gay man's sexual desirability even after they have departed from Bangkok. Additionally, these experiences are also important resources in constituting 'infrastructural sexual capital'– learnt competency and resilient self-esteem – which is exhibited by 'old hand' participants who regularly travel to Bangkok and are able to learn and enact sexual capital at a far more rapid pace across different situations.

# Chapter 6

## Travelling in order to engage in erotic massage

### 6.1 Introduction

As the end of the previous chapter demonstrated, conspicuous interaction as a form of sexual capital used by gay men to create sexually desirable images lead to some negative consequences. These include participants' sexual desirability deficiency-related anxiety and the devaluation of intimacy in their socio-sexual interactions. These consequences in part made many participants repeatedly engage in erotic massage, a sort of prostitution that combines oil massage with sexual intercourse, because they expected and believed that they could 'be a *Da-Ye*' (meaning 'master' in Mandarin, see section 6.2.1) or 'be a couple' with the masseur, by having power and intimacy when engaging in this particular form of sexual service. Participants' repeated engagements in this sexual practice (erotic massage) when they travelled to Bangkok explains why they keep travelling to Bangkok and show that this travel is a kind of sex tourism.

Moreover, participants' expectations of and belief in having power and intimacy in the sex through engaging in erotic massage also suggested that gay men buy sex – or, more generally, have sex – for reasons other than simply having sex. From the fieldwork, this chapter further argues that these expectations include not just fulfilling needs for power and intimacy but also creating the feeling of being or becoming sexually desirable, which is what they cannot get either in their daily lives or in other socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok. Through the theoretical framework of sexual desirability as a performative image which the previous chapter established (see 5.4.2), this chapter will illuminate the reciprocal causation between sexual desirability and power and intimacy. It will then consider how

these reciprocal causations motivate participants to repeatedly engage in erotic massage and lead to victimised feelings in relation this sexual service.

Concerning these victimised feelings, they are usually generated because participants' expectations of 'being *Da-Ye*' or 'being a couple' with the masseur were not met. The phenomenon that the majority of the participants felt they were victimised in erotic massage is apparently contrary to both common sense and academic research on the power imbalance in prostitution, which assumes sex workers are inevitable victims of disempowered status who are exploited by their clients. To clarify the cause of sex workers' victimhood, a great body of work asserts that gender inequality is the principle foundation which places (mostly female) sex workers in an inferior and sexually exploited position (O'Connell Davidson 2001, Pasko 2002, Shteir 2004, Katsulis 2010). However, investigating the phenomenon of White heterosexual females engaging in sex tourism to the Global South, Sanchez Taylor (2001, 2006) interrogates this gender essentialist perspective on sexual exploitation in prostitution and claims that the power imbalance is derived from the disparity of economic status between wealthy foreign tourists and the impoverished locals of host countries.

Gay Taiwanese men's feelings of victimisation when engaging in erotic massage in Bangkok encourage a rethink of the causes of power imbalance between sex workers and their clients, other than gender and economic status. Both the clients and masseurs involved in this specific form of prostitution are male and the status of being wealthy tourists does not prevent participants from feeling of being 'victimised' by local masseurs. Participants' feelings suggest the power relations between them and their masseurs are indeed dynamic, which resonates with some other scholars' claims that power in prostitution is not a 'zero-sum' game, solely held in one party's hand, but is more fluid and thereby deserves a subtler reassessment (Dennis 2008, Pilcher 2009, 2016, Weitzer 2010, Peng 2007, Chapkis 1997). Through the lens of sexual fields theory, this chapter firstly argues that sexual capital is one of the most crucial causes of the power reversal between prostitutes and their clients. Secondly, this chapter illustrates that the socio-sexual

interactions with the masseur in which participants holding power and intimacy are indeed a form of sexual capital for these gay men to perform and thus construct sexually desirable image. For this reason, most are eager to experience this as part of the service, making power and intimacy become another important cause of dynamic power relations between clients and prostitutes.

Elaborating on these arguments, this chapter is divided into two principle sections. The first section begins by elucidating the reciprocal causation between power and sexual desirability through participants' fantasies about 'being *Da-Ye*' in erotic massage. The power of being '*Da-Ye*', wielded by participants, is founded on the money they pay for the service. This research illustrates how economic capital is also an advantageous form of sexual capital; it empowers clients and enhances their sexual desirability in this monetary sexual field of prostitution. Following this, this section provides examples of multiple forms of victimisation in this setting and argues that these were mainly caused by the power imbalance between them and the masseur that resulted from their lack of other forms of sexual capital. This analysis offers a set of alternative understandings of both the scales and constitutive elements of sexual field.

The second section of this chapter starts with summarising participants' definitions of intimacy and then unpacks its reciprocal causation with sexual desirability, which evinces the notion that having intimacy with the masseur is indeed a form of 'conspicuous interaction' that participants desired to experience in order to create a sexually desirable image. After this, the section will move on to explore the interrelation between money and intimacy in erotic massage and evaluate how this intimacy might be a sort of masseurs' commercialised performance, which motivates participants to access 'authentic intimacy' in this sexual service. The section ends by considering how the different approaches participants adopted to access 'authentic intimacy' led to a power reversal between them and the masseur and hence generated their feelings of victimisation in erotic massage. However, these approaches might also work as a self-defence for



participants against the potential victimisations that come from the masseur's intimate performance.

### 6.2 Power, sexual capital and victimisation

According to participants' experiences of engaging in erotic massage, this section aims to unpack the entangled relationship between money, power, and sexual desirability in prostitution from the stance of clients. It illustrates how this entanglement leads power relations between participants and their masseurs to be dynamic or even reversed. Also, by means of a close reading of participants' narrations of their victimhood through the lens of sexual fields theory, this section demonstrates that, in prostitution, money does not always confer clients the power they expected because of the numerous other factors involved in their power relations with sex workers. Before discussing these factors, a brief outline of the service process and spatial setting of erotic massage in Bangkok is necessary.

#### 6.2.1 Being 'Da-Ye': Wielding power in erotic massage

As a specific form of prostitution which combines oil massage service with sexual intercourse, erotic massage is one of the most popular sexual activities that gay Taiwanese men engage in when they travelled to Bangkok. Although each erotic massage parlour in Bangkok has its own features, most share a common service process and spatial setting. Generally, when entering the massage parlour, a client will firstly encounter an area with a few sofas opposite a glass wall. The space behind this glass wall is populated by shirtless masseurs who actively solicit clients to choose them by ogling or showing off their physiques. At the same time, the '*Mamasan*'<sup>67</sup> of the parlour will approach clients and actively assist them in matching with a masseur. This represents the first stage of the erotic massage:

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<sup>67</sup> The term for the manager or assistants of massage parlours who work as consultants and introduce the rules or prices and provide each masseur's basic information (such as sexual orientation, physical characteristics such as penis size, and sexual roles) to help clients match with masseurs.

*selection*. After clients select a masseur, the length of the service<sup>68</sup> and the size of the massage room,<sup>69</sup> the selected masseur leaves the glass room and guides his client to a private massage room with a bed and shower. Then clients must shower while the masseur starts to prepare a kit for the oil massage that contains towels and bottles of massage oil before the second stage of the erotic massage: *serving*. From participants' narrations and my personal experiences, how masseurs distribute their time between oil massage and sexual intercourse varies considerably<sup>70</sup> since none of the massage parlours has an explicit rule to regulate this mixed service. The service normally ends with the client's ejaculation and is followed by the last stage of erotic massage: *tipping*.<sup>71</sup> This stage will be finished before clients leave the massage room.

During the time of fieldwork, two massage parlours – HERO and Prince – were frequently recommended and discussed by Taiwanese gay tourists in person or on the Facebook group 'Thai Fever' because of the quality<sup>72</sup> and quantity<sup>73</sup> of their masseurs. This reputation attracted most participants interested in erotic massage to go to these two parlours. Since both HERO and Prince are far from public transportation (BTS<sup>74</sup> and MRT<sup>75</sup>), participants and I usually took a 15-minute walk to the parlours and, during this walk, we usually had conversations about their

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<sup>68</sup> Most of the erotic massage parlours offer different options for length of service which range from one to three hours.

<sup>69</sup> In some massage parlours, they also provide different sizes of massage room in accordance with different prices.

<sup>70</sup> In some cases, the masseurs spend less than 5 minutes doing massage while in other cases participants said the sex session was completed within 10 minutes.

<sup>71</sup> The expense of erotic massage is usually split into two parts. One pays for the massage parlour and the other is the tip for the masseur. Each parlour has its own minimum requirement for the tip which varies from 700 Baht to 1500 Baht (at the time the fieldwork was conducted). Clients can tip more if they are satisfied with the service provided.

<sup>72</sup> Compared to other erotic massage parlours, most masseurs in these two shops are men who with sexually desirable appearances in a conventional sense, even including porn actors and amateur models.

<sup>73</sup> Generally speaking, there are more than 20 masseurs to choose from in these two parlours, which is far more than most parlours where there are usually fewer than 10.

<sup>74</sup> The Bangkok Transit System.

<sup>75</sup> The Metropolitan Rapid Transit system.

fantasies in erotic massage, which illustrated why they want to engage in this prostitution, especially when travelling to Bangkok.

One of the fantasies mentioned repeatedly by different participants was, in their words, ‘being *Da-Ye*’.<sup>76</sup> This fantasy is intricately entangled with wielding power when interacting with the masseur. According to participants’ narrations, this power is usually manifested in two aspects. Firstly, many participants shared that they really enjoyed having the power to select masseurs, which they described as akin to an emperor’s privilege of ‘*selecting concubines*’<sup>77</sup> in ancient China. As participant David recalled, ‘*over there, (massage parlour), I felt I’m an emperor as I was allowed to select any hot guys with whom I’d like to have sex, which is impossible in daily life*’. Secondly, for other participants, the fantasy of ‘being *Da-Ye*’ in erotic massage is also embodied in ‘being served unilaterally’. Participant Wood asserted this:

*For one-night-stands, I think pleasing the sexual partner reciprocally is an obligation since both sides want to have fun and that’s why they meet. But when buying sex, I’m the Da-Ye so he (masseur) has to please me but I am not obligated to make him happy or care about his feelings, it’s not my job’. (Wood, 28 years old, follow-up interview)*

These extracts disclose that, from either their personal experiences or word-of-mouth from others, many participants expected and even believed that in erotic massage they would and must be conferred the power to choose sexual partners, particularly the ‘sexually desirable’<sup>78</sup> ones, and be served by them unilaterally. These expectations and beliefs are associated with the heavy monetary

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<sup>76</sup> In Mandarin, the term ‘Da-Ye’ means a male with distinctively higher socio-economic status and thereby one who holds power to dominate people such as landlords, bosses or high-ranking officials.

<sup>77</sup> In popular media representations, concubine selections are commonly depicted as an event in ancient China in which young women were recruited to be chosen by male emperors.

<sup>78</sup> Here, the term ‘sexually desirable’, according to participants, indicates men with both attractive physical appearances and sexual skills.

investments they made for erotic massage, which led them to suppose that they ought to hold power they normally cannot have in non-transactional sexual encounters such as one-night-stands. Extending from his assertion that 'it's not my job', participant Wood further claimed that if he also had to serve the masseur reciprocally, *'then why not just go to the sauna? I spend a lot of money on this [erotic massage]'*, which illuminates the close connection between money and power here. According to his research on strip clubs, DeMarco defines power in sex industry as 'the capacity to exercise control or processing the ability to get others to accede to one's will' (DeMarco 2007, p.114), which seemingly resonates with participants' fantasies of 'being Da-Ye' in erotic massage. Participants felt that they are conferred power to dominate the socio-sexual interactions in this sexual service through selecting masseurs and forcing them to provide sexual services regardless of their desires and feelings.

However, through a closer reading on participants' narrations about their engagements in erotic massage, I find out that they wielded power over the masseur not merely to dominate them, which some research of prostitution asserts (see Katsulis 2010) is a way that male clients show their masculinity. More importantly, I argue that participants wielded this power to create the feeling that they are sexually desirable which then fulfilled their need to enhance or sustain their sexual desirability. This connection between power and sexual desirability manifests in participants' practice of selecting masseurs, which can be explicated through the lens of sexual fields theory. As Green argues, a sexually desirable gay man with enriched possession of sexual capital usually enjoys privilege to select sexual partners and access social significance<sup>79</sup> (Green 2008a, 2011, 2014a). My participant observations resonate with Green's argument, mentioned in chapter 4, since gay Taiwanese men's sexual-sociality operates in a 'pecking order'; those sexually desirable men, namely '*Tien-Tsai*', usually enjoy the privilege of selecting from a range of sexual partners. Thus, when selecting masseurs, many participants

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<sup>79</sup> According to Green's definition, this social significance includes increased access to bars and nightclubs or free drinks.

revealed that for a moment, they felt as if they were becoming '*Tien-Tsai*', which illustrated that wielding power as a '*Da-Ye*' in erotic massage brought these men ephemeral feelings of either being or becoming sexually desirable.

Likewise, the connection between power and sexual desirability in prostitution also embodies another aspect of being '*Da-Ye*', 'being served unilaterally', which relates to a situational mindset of 'self-enslavement' among some participants. This mindset normally emerges in the situation that a gay man having socio-sexual interactions with the '*Tien-Tsai*' who is far more sexually desirable. Participant Albert's self-reflections illustrate this mindset. In his experiences, Albert recalled that when 'hooking up' with the handsome men, he usually assumed he was obliged to serve them in a one-sided way or meet most of their sexual requirements, including those that go against his own desires.<sup>80</sup> This self-enslaving, Albert revealed, is in order to compensate for the sexual desirability gap between him and these handsome men. In the fieldwork, similar narrations were advanced more than a few times by different participants, which demonstrated that being served unilaterally is indeed a form of power exclusively reserved for gay men with desirable physical appearances. Therefore, some participants shared that when receiving the unilateral service in erotic massage, they felt sexually desirable or that their sexual desirability was enhanced.

To reiterate, for some participants, they travelled to Bangkok and repeatedly engage in erotic massage was for more than just having sex with the masseur but also accessing the feeling of being and becoming sexual desirable through wielding the power over him. This feeling and power is something participants rarely experience in their daily lives due to the 'pecking order' that operates among gay men in Taiwan, which originates from the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwanese society. Also, this feeling is provided precariously in other socio-sexual spaces in Bangkok since the evaluation of their sexual desirability is

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<sup>80</sup> For example, Albert mentioned that he tends to play the sex role of 'bottom' when having sex with more attractive partners even though he self-identifies as 'top'.

usually in flux (see 4.3.5) in these spaces. Thus, many participants' repeated engagements in erotic massage when travelling to Bangkok in part represents an escape from both the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan and frustrations at Bangkok's socio-sexual spaces.

Viewed from another perspective, participants' experiences of being '*Da-Ye*' in erotic massage not only exemplify the entanglement between money, power, and sexual desirability, but also underscores that money in part enhances, at least in the aspect of self-evaluation, their sexual desirability. In this sense, money is indeed a particular form of sexual capital in prostitution which enhances clients' sexual desirability. Therefore, I argue that prostitution is a monetary sexual field that slightly differs from other sexual fields since the context of interactions here is transactional and hence constitutes a nuanced structure of desire in which money is conferred high sexual currency. Following this argument, the sexual field is constituted by more than a specific sexual sub-culture, spatial design and the aforementioned circuit of actors. Instead, the specific interactional context, such as the transactional nature, also constitutes its own sexual field.

### **6.2.2 Prostitution as a monetary sexual field**

However, participants' experiences of victimisation in erotic massage indicate that the money they possessed and invested in erotic massage was not transformed into power and sexual desirability since it is not the sole sexual capital in this monetary sexual field (prostitution). In this section, I will argue that other 'core sexual capitals' (see 4.4.3) such as sexual skills and knowledge and physical appearance still play a pivotal role in influencing the power relations between clients and sex workers, which offers critical insight into argument of prostitution as a slightly different sexual field from others.

#### **6.2.2.1 Sexual skills and knowledge**

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In the case of receiving the masseur's unilateral service in erotic massage, some participants' experiences revealed that this aspect of being 'Da-Ye' did not always give them power over the masseur. Instead, this service showed participants' cession of their power to the masseur due to their lack of sexual skills and knowledge. As mentioned in the previous chapter (see 5.2.1), participant Kyle is a young man who lacks practical sexual experience and so regarded Bangkok as a 'cram school' in which he expected to learn skills and knowledge concerning having sex. When we met for the first time, Kyle revealed that he had set a goal to lose his virginity in Bangkok. Therefore, he requested that I take him to an erotic massage parlour because he assumed the masseurs, given their enriched sexual experience, would be ideal 'sex instructors' from whom he could learn these skills and knowledge. Secondly, Kyle's urge to engage in erotic massage is also due to the unilateral sexual service offered in this sexual interaction:

*You know I don't have much experience (of sex) so making love is something that always stresses me since I really have no idea about how to start it and what to do, which is especially embarrassing because I'm a top.<sup>81</sup> Thus, engaging in erotic massage is far more relaxed as I don't need to do anything but just lie there and wait to be served by masseurs. (Kyle, 25 years old, fieldwork note)*

This quote advances an alternative understanding of 'unilateral service' in erotic massage. Other than an embodiment of the power that clients wield over the masseur, this service represents clients ceding the power of dominating sexual interactions to the masseur due to their lack of sexual skills. In this context, sexual skills or knowledge as a form of sexual capital is also the source of power for people engaging in the erotic massage. This is due to the notable gap between some participants and the masseur concerning possessing this sexual capital, which led

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<sup>81</sup> In interview Kyle further explained that this embarrassment comes from his belief that the 'top' should be the one who dominates the sexual interactions so lacking relevant sexual skills and knowledge made him feel that he is an 'unqualified top'.

them to be dominated and hence exploited by masseurs. This was Kyle's experience in the erotic massage parlour HERO, where the masseur initiated anal sex (as a top) without his consent. When Kyle asked the masseur to stop, because he self-identifies as a 'top', the masseur persuaded him he would be gentle and then continued. Furthermore, Kyle said that he discovered only towards the end of the session that the masseur had not used a condom, convinced him it was safe<sup>82</sup> and continued until they both climaxed. Kyle's experience of being forced to have unprotected sex in erotic massage resulted in his feelings of victimisation.

Kyle's victimisation shows that, as a client, money did not give him the power to dominate the interaction. Because of his lack of experience, Kyle chose to be passive and received 'unilateral service' in erotic massage, which ceded the power to the masseur and hence enabled him to force Kyle to play an unpleasant sexual role and engage in unprotected sex. Also, as Kyle claimed, it is because of his lack of sexual skills and knowledge that led to his compromise of being the 'bottom', which was for the sake of learning how to be a 'qualified top' from the masseur because he has '*no idea about how to do it*'. Besides, Kyle also indicated that the unprotected sex originated from his lack of sexual knowledge because he could not distinguish the lack of protection nor check this. This experience demonstrates that, despite money, sexual skills and knowledge as a form of sexual capital are still influential in prostitution (a monetary sexual field) as they crucially determine the power relations between clients and sex workers.

### 6.2.2.2 Physical appearance

It is notable from the fieldwork that another form of sexual capital, physical appearance, also plays an important role in determining power relations in prostitution, which is manifested in the stage of 'selecting masseurs'. At this stage, clients usually wield power over the masseurs. However, from my participant

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<sup>82</sup> According to Kyle's narration, the masseur told him that he is far cleaner and safer than strangers because sex workers in Thailand must undergo regular STI testing, which successfully persuaded Kyle to continue unprotected sex with him.



observations in the lobby of the erotic massage parlour, I found that masseurs were in fact not so vulnerable during selection as they were also selecting clients in an implicit way, which was embodied in their distinct attitudes when confronting different clients. For instance, it was apparent that when a few '*Tien-Tsai*' type participants entered the massage parlour, most masseurs were very actively soliciting their attention in order to be chosen. In contrast, masseurs were comparatively inactive with other participants, which implied that physical appearances is still an important form of sexual capital for clients in prostitution as it determines the way they are treated by sex workers.

The phenomenon of masseurs' silent selection of clients was further demonstrated through a post on the Facebook group 'Thai fever' from a member called Tory who shared his experience of being victimised in erotic massage in Bangkok. Tory indicated that in a famous erotic massage parlour, he selected a '*Tien-Tsai*' masseur who looked coldly at him from behind the glass wall. Tory said during the service stage, this masseur rejected many of his requirements for sexual interactions, such as kissing and cuddling, but had sex with him in a clinical manner<sup>83</sup> and even avoided any eye-contact. Many 'old hand' gay tourists in this Facebook group commented on Tory's victimisation by pointing out that '*it's because you (Tory) are not his (the masseur) type*'. This case elucidates that although masseurs are obligated to offer sexual services to any client who selects them, some also have the power to explicitly express their preferences for clients during the service. This power originates from these masseurs' sexually desirable physical appearances (sexual capital), which is illustrated by Benny's explication of why he is sick of engaging in the erotic massage at those popular massage parlours. he stated,

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<sup>83</sup> According to the post, this clinical manner was manifested in the masseur's refusal to kiss, cuddle and talk during the service, which made their sexual interaction akin to a Standard Operating Procedure.

*Most masseurs there are the 'peacock',<sup>84</sup> they are just spoiled so that only if you are their type they treat you like a client. It's because they don't worry about having no clients as they are young and handsome, which makes them quite picky (Benny, 43 years old, follow-up interview).*

Benny said he was summarising from both personal experiences and those of his friends, suggesting that the more attractive the masseur is, the more power he has in selecting clients. A masseur's sexually desirable physical appearance (core sexual capital) normally brings him a sufficient customer base to secure his livelihood and to confer on him the power to explicitly express his sexual interest in clients whether at the stage of 'selecting' or 'serving'. This illustration resonates with another of my observations in the parlour lobby during the selecting stage, where I noticed that masseurs' degrees of vigour regarding soliciting clients vary substantially. This difference is apparently related to their physical appearances. The less sexually desirable masseurs<sup>85</sup> usually came to the front of glass wall and showed their bodies or looked suggestively and enthusiastically at clients entering. 'Tien-Tsai' masseurs tended to exhibit an indifferent manner, just stood at the corner distracted by their mobile phones. However, even with their indifferent manner, 'Tien-Tsai' masseurs still have far more clients than others, which I witnessed many times that soon after returning to the selecting area from serving the previous client, they had already been selected again. Their colleagues, who actively solicited clients, remained hung out to dry.

Moreover, this indifferent manner, according to some other 'old hand' participants' interpretations of their personal experiences, is an implicit signal that 'Tien-Tsai' masseurs send to communicate disinterest in the clients and warn them that they should not select him to serve or they will receive a clinical service. Thus, to ensure sexual pleasure, these participants indicated that they would avoid selecting

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<sup>84</sup> In a Taiwanese gay men's context, the term 'peacock' indicates one who is handsome and extremely proud of it, which leads them to look down on others.

<sup>85</sup> The evaluation of these masseurs as 'less sexually desirable' is made on the basis of a general notion of gay men's sexual desirability which concerning age and body shape.

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masseurs with desirable appearances but indifferent manners (see 6.3.4.1). This avoidance demonstrated that '*Tien-Tsai*' masseurs in part also hold power to select which clients to serve.

These examples illuminate that sexual capital such as sexual skills and knowledge and physical appearance are important resources of power in the monetary sexual field of prostitution because they invert the power relationship. The masseur's superior possession of this sexual capital enables him to force his clients to engage in certain interactions or to select particular client silently. Moreover, gay Taiwanese men's experiences of engaging in erotic massage also indicated that even though, they invested lot of money in this prostitution, they were still easily dominated by more attractive masseurs with greater sexual experience.

However, this domination does not imply that prostitution as a monetary sexual field does not slightly differ from other sexual fields. Instead, it demonstrates that sexual skills/knowledge and physical appearance are forms of core sexual capital which are broadly applicable across different sexual fields. Therefore, although prostitution is a monetary sexual field which valorises money as an advantageous form of sexual capital, participants who possess it were not inevitably conferred the power to 'select concubines' and 'receive unilateral service' as they expected. In erotic massage, money as a form of sexual capital does not always compensate for a lack of core sexual capital, which led to participants' victimised experiences of being forced to engage in particular sexual interactions<sup>86</sup> or selected by masseurs, rather than vice versa. Additionally, prostitution being a slightly different sexual field is also exemplified in the case of '*Tien-Tsai*' masseurs' power of selecting their clients because this power in part is backed by masseurs' sound financial foundation, which links their desirable physical appearances to a better livelihood. That is to say, money is indeed the sexual capital which empowers masseurs to select clients.

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<sup>86</sup> As shown in Kyle's case, the unilateral sexual service from masseurs resulted in his being forced to be 'bottom' and engage in unprotected sex.

To summarise, in the monetary sexual field of prostitution, money is an important form of sexual capital for both clients and sex workers. Participants' experiences did not mean that the sexual currency of other forms of core sexual capital outweigh money in erotic massage. Instead, participants' victimisations resulted from the gap in economic status between them and some masseurs being narrowed so that power relations were then determined by core sexual capital such as sexual skills and knowledge and physical appearance. Therefore, I argue that prostitution is a sexual field which slightly differs from others as it has a specific structure of desire, which valorises money as an advantageous sexual capital for both of the client and prostitute and determines power relations between them.

### **6.2.3 Erotic massage as a sexual field**

The argument that prostitution is a slightly different sexual field from others with its distinct structure of desire can also be seen in that set 'knowledge of prostitution' functions as important sexual capital in this socio-sexual interaction. In different forms of prostitution, due to specific interactional contexts and spatial settings, clients can be vulnerable and thus victimised. Therefore, the particular set of prostitution knowledge acts as a form of sexual capital which enables clients to cope with potential victimisation. Two types of victimisation discussed below will illustrate how the specific interactional context and spatial setting involved in erotic massage resulted in some participants' feeling victimised. They also serve as examples of the particular set of knowledge which other 'old hand' participants applied to cope with these potential victimisations.

#### **6.2.3.1 The stress of selecting masseurs and 'stolen time'**

Supposedly, selecting masseurs is a stage of erotic massage where clients wield their power to pick any sexual partner they like unrestrictedly. However, in practice, the exercise of this power is fragile because many participants were not only selected by the masseur as discussed in the previous section, but also faced

different types of stress which led them to select a masseur whom they disliked. This comes partially from the spatial setting of the glass wall in the selection area, which allows both clients and masseurs to see each other. From my observations, normally when a client entered into the massage parlour, there would be more than twenty masseurs in front of the glass wall who aggressively gazed or ogled him at the same time. This situation usually blurred and even reversed the power and roles of gazer and the gazed between clients and masseurs, which generated a strong sense of discomfort and stress to participants who lacked experience in this form of prostitution. As participant Ren recalled, '*at that time [selecting masseurs], I felt I was more like prey than predator*', so that he actually felt unable to look directly at the masseurs and in fact selected someone without seeing his face properly.

Secondly, participants' stress of selecting masseurs also came from *Mamasan* of the erotic massage parlour. As Pilcher's study (2009) of the strip bar discloses, the 'third party' involved in sexual transactions also has a notable influence on shaping power relations between clients and sex workers. My observations found that a few times when participants took a longer time in selecting the masseur, the *Mamasan* would continually come over and pressure them to make a decision as soon as possible with an impatient attitude and threatening language. This situation generally led inexperienced participants to feel guilty about their hesitations and obliged to select a masseur regardless of their preferences because of the inconvenience they had caused. Thus, many participants selected the masseur in a random way without careful consideration, which eventually resulted in an unpleasant experience.

Also, another form of victimhood in erotic massage which many participants experienced is 'stolen time', or the masseur deliberately using different tactics to finish his service ahead of time. I paid specific attention to this and recorded the time participants spent engaging in the service. I found that none of them received this service for over 50 minutes, while some cases even finished within 35

minutes,<sup>87</sup> which was far less than the time they purchased. Since the expense of erotic massage is calculated by the hour, 'stolen time' is indeed fraud or even implicit robbery that can be regarded as the embodiment of the masseur subverting the dominant system of power, which inexperienced clients are usually unable to resist. According to participants' narrations, this power subversion is inherently related to the interactional context and spatial setting involved in erotic massage.

Firstly, concerning the interactional context, no massage parlour in Bangkok has an explicit instruction which lists what kind of services (socio-sexual interaction)<sup>88</sup> are included that the masseur is obligatory to offer. Instead, the only information about the content of the service is a vague promise that '*our masseurs can/will do whatever you want*' from the *Mamasan*. Thus, as many participants asserted, the masseur did not always 'do whatever the clients want' but in fact had the power to reject their requests<sup>89</sup> and determine the time distribution between massage and sexual intercourse, which is intimately related to the 'stolen time' in erotic massage. Since the masseur generally regards clients' orgasm as the end point of service, some participants indicated that their masseurs tended to be perfunctory in the massage session or even just skipped over it to directly initiate sexual intercourse for the sake of making clients reach orgasm as soon as possible. This constitutes an important way for the masseur to 'steal time' from them.

The masseurs' dominant power in erotic massage is also associated with the spatial setting while this form of prostitution is usually conducted in a private massage room, which enables them to escape from *Mamasan's* surveillance and to exercise

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<sup>87</sup> The time I calculated started from participants following their masseurs to the private room and ended when they finished this sexual service and returned to the lobby. Thus, deducting the time that participants spent undressing and dressing and travelling to and from the lobby, the service was even shorter than my calculation.

<sup>88</sup> Such as what kind of sexual interactions the masseurs are willing to engage in, and also the time distribution between massage and sexual intercourse.

<sup>89</sup> In many cases, participants experienced that their masseurs refuse to kiss them or be 'bottom' through asserting that they were heterosexual.

discretion in arranging the time-allocation of the services they offer. From a clients' stance, many participants also mentioned that they felt vulnerable in this massage room since it isolated them from the outside world and meant they could not seek help immediately for victimisation such as 'stolen time', which weakened their bargaining power to claim the time back.

### 6.2.3.2 Knowledge of erotic massage

However, other gay Taiwanese men's engagements in erotic massage also exemplified the 'knowledge of erotic massage' required to avoid such victimisations. For instance, regarding the stress of selecting masseurs, some participants seemed to be relaxed when sitting on sofa in front of the glass wall and mutually gazed at masseurs. This relaxation is intimately related to their previous experiences of engaging in erotic massage. As participant Joe shared, when he was still a newbie of erotic massage, being gazed at by many masseurs made him too shy to raise his head. But, after frequenting this sexual service, Joe realised that these gazes are just the tactic they use to solicit clients and hence he started to enjoy this visual flirting with masseurs and even gazed back boldly. Also, from their victimised experiences in the past, 'old hand' participants comprehended the importance of selecting a masseur who fits most of their requirements and were aware that it is their right as a client. Therefore, these participants tended to confirm the information of different masseurs in detail by asking *Mamasan*, disregarding his impatient attitude and threatening language so that they were free from being pressured to select a masseur in a hurry and with reluctance. This disregard for *Mamasan's* pressure was based on these 'old hand' participants' knowledge of erotic massage, identifying that clients are granted the right to not only take their time in considering which masseur to select but also to leave the massage parlour without selecting anyone if they so wish.

In addition, concerning the 'stolen time', some participants were conscious that it is a violation of their rights and also developed particular strategies to cope with it, which is based on their enriched experiences of engaging in erotic massage. These

strategies include, for example, participants assuming the dominant role by returning the massage, leading the rhythm of the service and ensuring the duration would not be cut short. Furthermore, with the knowledge of that the erotic massage generally ends at the point of the client's orgasm, some participants asserted that they would delay ejaculation to avoid 'stolen time'. Participant Yi said:

*I know these masseurs tend to do their best to make me cum as soon as possible since it means everything is done. But, come on, I bought it [erotic massage] for an hour, so I usually interrupted their actions to calm me down when I wanted to cum. By doing so, I extended it to the length that it should be (Yi, 38 years old, follow-up interview)*

To sum up, due to the specific interactional context and spatial setting, participants are predestined to be situated in a vulnerable position when engaging in this particular form of prostitution and this causes their victimised experiences. These experiences led some 'old hand' participants to develop a set of corresponding knowledge to cope with the potential victimisation. The knowledge of erotic massage indeed conferred these participants power to contest the masseur to preserve their sexual pleasure from his exploitation. Therefore, whilst this knowledge aids participants in accessing sexual pleasure, it is a form of sexual capital in the context of erotic massage, which offers two insights. Firstly, knowledge of erotic massage as a form of sexual capital illustrates that this capital is not just the component of and competency in enhancing (such as infrastructural sexual capital) an individual's sexual desirability but, in a broader sense, it is his ability to access sexual pleasure. Secondly, this knowledge, as an important form of sexual capital, also demonstrates that this particular form of prostitution is a slightly different sexual field from others as it has a nuanced structure of desire, which in part is constituted by the specific interactional context and spatial setting of erotic massage. Furthermore, erotic massage as a sexual field indicates that the interactional context and spatial setting are crucial elements that constitute a



sexual field, which resonates with the arguments this research has made so far (see 4.3.1 and 6.2.1).

### **6.2.4 Erotic massage ‘in Bangkok’ as a sexual field**

Another pivotal finding about the relationship between power and sexual capital is that gay Taiwanese men’s victimised feelings when engaging in erotic massage in Bangkok also occur because they engaged in it in a transnational situation of travelling abroad. Participants’ status as tourists put them in a vulnerable position in Bangkok’s erotic massage parlours, which interrogates the conventional exploiter-victim binary between foreign tourists and local sex workers that current studies on sex tourism assert (Law 2004, Sanchez Taylor 2006). Following this interrogation, this section aims to demonstrate how foreign language competency and local residency in Bangkok work as forms of sexual capital when participants engage in erotic massage in the context of travelling to Bangkok. This section will further explore which elements constitute a sexual field and clarify the role money plays in the power relations between clients and sex workers in prostitution.

#### **6.2.4.1 Foreign language competency**

According to participants’ narrations and my personal experiences, engaging in erotic massage demands a set of oral communications between clients and their masseurs, concerning consent, refusal and negotiation about carrying out different socio-sexual interactions during the stage of the service. However, the role of language in these communications is yet to be thoroughly discussed in academia. Since many prostitution studies are conducted in a domestic context or even in the realm of sex tourism, they usually assume that sex workers are (or are supposed to be) proficient in foreign languages (Cheng 2007) so that communication is not an issue in prostitution, even if it occurred in a transnational context. But, participants’ experiences in this research indicate a language barrier between client and masseur because the majority are not fluent in English or Thai, which is another crucial cause of their victimisation in this transnational sex trade.

Participants Ming's feelings of victimisation at different stages of erotic massage illustrate how a client's lack of foreign language competency situates him in a vulnerable position in erotic massage in Bangkok. In his three erotic massage experiences, Ming claimed that the first time he went to the erotic massage parlour, being without my company as a translator in the selection stage, he was unable to express his sexual preferences, such sexual role, to the *Mamasan* either in Thai or English, or understand *Mamasan's* introductions of each masseur. Thus, Ming blindly selected a masseur which turned out to be a deeply unpleasant experience, because both of them play the role of 'bottom'. Ming's victimisation also extended to the stage of *serving*. During his second time of engaging in this form of prostitution, Ming selected a masseur who was very rough and hurt him. However, in that moment, Ming kept silent since he said that, *'I didn't know how to tell him my feelings so I just tolerated it till the end'*. The third time, the masseur was unable to achieve an erection, which Ming asserted that, *'If it happened in Taiwan, I would definitely call the Mamasan to ask him to replace another masseur or give my money back. But again, because I cannot communicate with Mamasan, I can only take it lying down'*.

Ming's lack of foreign language competency made him unable to select an appropriate masseur and disempowered him in claiming his right to sexual pleasure through erotic massage, because he was unable to negotiate or complain. Foreign language competency in part is another source of power and hence sexual capital that leads participants to access sexual pleasure in engaging in erotic massage when they travel to Bangkok. As Ming asserted, his feelings of being victimised would not occur if the context of his engagement in erotic massage was Taiwan because there would be no language-barrier to express his sexual preferences, physical feelings and complaints, which are crucial to a pleasurable experience. This assertion illustrates that, for gay Taiwanese men, the transnational context of engaging in erotic massage in Bangkok converts the cultural capital of foreign language competency into an important form of sexual

capital, which determines the power relation between them and the masseur and thereby their sexual pleasure in this form of prostitution.

### 6.2.4.2 Bangkok's residents

Through the fieldwork I also found that a client's residency related to his power and hence the sexual pleasure he gains from erotic massage in Bangkok. This finding was initiated from my participant observations in massage parlour lobbies, where I witnessed many times that different local clients, mostly at least 60 years old, were greeted with an elaborate welcome including both *Mamasan's* exceptional hospitality and masseurs' vigorous solicitation, which were akin to the treatment some 'Tien-Tsai' clients received. These scenes showed that the older local clients' lack of core sexual capital (physical appearance) did not situate them in a vulnerable position like some of my participants.

This discriminating treatment implied that, other than physical appearance, clients' power and hence pleasure in erotic massage are conferred by some other factors, which can be explained from participant Vito's 'insider perspective'. Vito is a gay Taiwanese man who studied in Bangkok and worked as a part-time *Mamasan* in one of the famous erotic massage parlours. He claimed the operating revenue of erotic massage parlours in Bangkok still heavily relies on local clients since their frequentations provide a stable income and they are more generous in terms of paying extra tips to both the *Mamasan*<sup>90</sup> and masseurs, which usually exceed the minimum requirements. So it is crucial for *Mamasan* and masseurs to build up and maintain a good relationship with local clients. Conversely, for them, building a close relationship with foreign tourists such as my participants is unnecessary because they do not reside in Bangkok and will not engage in erotic massage as frequently as the locals do. Thus, foreign tourists are viewed as

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<sup>90</sup> Generally speaking, there is no strict rule to give tips to *Mamasan* but it seems like part of the culture of erotic massage parlours in Bangkok as I observed that most local clients did so. However, while most foreign tourists such as my participants are first-time clients or unfamiliar with this tipping culture, they normally have no idea about paying extra tips to either *Mamasan* or the masseurs, which leads them to be commonly regarded as stingy and therefore unprofitable clients.

unprofitable clients so their treatment usually aligns with the degree to which their physical appearances match with the masseur's sexual habitus. In this sense, participants whose physical appearances do not articulate with the hegemonic structure of desire in Thailand were more likely to feel victimised in this sexual service. In contrast, regardless of the sexual desirability of their physical appearance, elderly local clients mostly receive hospitable treatments from both masseurs and *Mamasan*, which uncovered that the residency is another crucial source of power in erotic massage in Bangkok.

These cases show that some participants' feelings of victimisation in erotic massage arose in relation to their lack of foreign language competency and local residency. In turn, other clients who possess these two personal characteristics are often able to access sexual pleasure in erotic massage, which demonstrates that these characteristics are valorised as forms of sexual capital by the nuanced structure of desire generated from a transnational situation. Specifically, I argue that for gay Taiwanese men, erotic massage 'in Bangkok' is a slightly different sexual field in this particular transnational situation, because given personal characteristics (such as foreign language competency) become sexual capital. For instance, the gay spa in Taiwan, a sexual service similar to Bangkok's erotic massage, is indeed a different sexual field for participants. Like participant Ming said, he feels more powerful and hence less likely to be victimised in Taiwan's gay spa since he can easily express himself, which implies that foreign language competency is an unnecessary sexual capital in this sexual field because he is a native speaker. The comparison between Ming's power in Bangkok's erotic massage parlours and Taiwan's gay spa illustrates that the transnational situation itself is a crucial element that constitutes a sexual field. That is to say, erotic massage 'in Bangkok' is a specific sexual field for gay Taiwanese men because it is a transnational sex trade.

Moreover, the cases where a client's residency is associated with his (dis)empowerment and hence sexual (dis)pleasure in Bangkok's erotic massage also clarify the role money plays in the power relations between clients and sex workers in prostitution, which manifests in three aspects. Firstly, some

participants' experiences suggested that their feelings of being victimised in erotic massage were related to their status as foreign tourists. This relation demonstrates that the perspective from current studies on sex tourism, which assumes foreign tourists are inevitably exploitative in transnational prostitution because of their superior economic status, is problematic. Secondly, the cases of hospitality that old local clients enjoyed also resonate with the argument I advanced previously concerning money as an important form of sexual capital in prostitution, which empowers clients to access sexual pleasure. Because of this clients with local residency usually enjoy better treatment in this context since they are viewed as 'profitable' by masseurs. Thirdly, these cases also clarify that the argument about money as sexual capital for clients in prostitution lies not in one's economic status, but one's investment potential, or how much one is willing to spend on these services, which generally relates to residency.

### **6.3 Intimacy, money and sexual desirability**

Concerning participants' fantasies about erotic massage, I also discerned that the feeling of 'being in a couple' with the masseur is another expectation many of them shared of this sexual service. This discernment echoes an 'intimate-turn' of prostitution studies which has emerged recently. A significant body of empirical research identified that seeking emotional ties, company and feeling loved are the most significant reasons for both male and female clients to engage in different forms of prostitution (Cohen 1986, Bernstein 2007a, 2007b, Peng 2007, Katsulis 2010, Frohlick 2007, 2012, 2013, Hoang 2010, Mitchell 2011), which broadens the analysis of sexual transaction to move beyond the traditional focus on 'sexual urge and expression of power' to a new realm: intimacy (Sanders 2008b, p.89).

However, some scholars also suggest that clients seeking intimacy in prostitution do not do so to fulfil emotional needs but to build up their 'sense of self-worth' (Dorfman 2011, Johnson 2007, Nyanzi et al. 2005, Egan 2005, 2003, Deshotels and Forsyth 2006), which presents the multiple efficacies of intimacy. Inspired by these findings, the following section aims to further explore the entanglement between

intimacy and sexual desirability and explicates how this entanglement motivates participants to repeatedly engage in erotic massage. Moreover, the section will also suggest that while the financial aspect raises participants' concern for the 'authenticity of intimacy', explains approaches they adopt to access this authenticity and analyses the resultant power reversal this entails.

### 6.3.1 Intimacy and sexual desirability in reciprocal causation

We must define intimacy in a sexual context before analysing why the feeling of 'being a couple' is a collective fantasy for participants in erotic massage and a motivator of their involvement in this sexual service. Summarising from different participants' narrations, the research finds that the intimacy they referred to is mainly manifested in two aspects. Firstly, intimacy indicates physical closeness, which not a few participants stated that they only have physically close interactions such as anal sex or 'French kiss' with the man who they love or is sexually desirable, since these sexual interactions are ultimately intimate. This statement illustrates that a given sexual partner's tier of desirability normally determines how intimate the sexual interaction in which participants are willing to engage in with him. For example, in the case of participant Wood's tolerance of sexual harassment from, in his words, 'ugly guys' in the liminal context (see 3.5.1), he asserted that these unpleasant sexual interactions are bearable since they are limited to a less intimate degree of merely 'touching and hugging'. But he would never have full intercourse with 'this level of ugly guys' because it is a highly intimate interaction which he reserves for other sexually desirable men. Secondly, the intimacy that participants referred to also highlights an intangible aspect of affection and love. For instance, participant Orange pointed out that his disgust at casual sex originates from its lack of intimacy:

*I've met guys who rejected any conversation either before or after we fucked [when having casual sex]. Also, none of them have ever asked me how I felt when we were fucking. All of this made me feel that casual sex is not 'making love' as there is no love involved but just sexual release,*

*like animals. I guess for them [men he had casual sex with] I'm just a sex toy... It really sucks (Orange, 27 years old, follow-up interview)*

That sexual partners have never expressed interest in his feelings leads Orange to believe that casual sex is devoid of affection and love. The association between conversation or care and affection can be explained from the concept of the 'sexual script', which Sanders (2008a, 2008b) uses to describe given interactions being conferred intimate meanings in the context of having sex because they are normally conducted between people in relationship. Therefore, whilst the absence of affection led Orange to believe that there is no intimacy in casual sex, it demonstrates that, for him, intimacy in sex in part indicates affection or love. Moreover, Orange's extract also indicates a prevailing hierarchical understanding of sexual activities among participants. In this hierarchy, the tier of each sexual activity relies on the degree of intimacy between individuals whom involve. For example, many participants regarded sexual interaction without intimacy as animal-like '*sexual release*', or an inferior form of sexual activity. Conversely, sexual activities involving affection or love are ranked as superior to others in this hierarchy.

From the fieldwork, I observed that many participants used this hierarchical understanding to evaluate the sexual desirability of both themselves and others. Firstly, concerning sexual desirability, Orange's case shows that his disgust at casual sex originates from not only that this sexual activity cannot fulfil his emotional needs of intimacy and that its impersonal (non-intimate) nature led him to evaluate himself as a sexually undesirable and objectified '*sex toy*'. This self-evaluation comes from a shared perception among participants that the intimacy of the sexual interaction that gay men are willing to engage in is usually determined by their sexual partners' tier of desirability. Therefore, sexual partners' rejections of more intimate sexual interactions may undermine a gay man's self-evaluation of his sexual desirability. On the contrary, engaging in highly intimate sexual interactions with sexually desirable guys would enhance a gay man's

sexually desirable image and self-esteem. Also, a gay man who is sexually desirable finds it easier to have intimately sexual interactions with other gay men. To sum up, this hierarchy of sexual activities illuminates that (sexual) intimacy and a gay man's sexual desirability are in reciprocal causation. Because of this reciprocal causation, some participants indeed made efforts to enhance their sexual desirability for the sake of having intimacy, which is embodied in the case of participant Ren learning to be a more sexually desirable gay man in order to have his first boyfriend (see 5.2.1).

### 6.3.2 Intimacy matters in erotic massage

Returning to my participants' collective fantasy about experiencing the feeling of 'being a couple' with the masseur when engaging in erotic massage, I argue that the reciprocal causation between intimacy and sexual desirability is an insightful perspective from which to explicate why some gay Taiwanese men seek intimacy through erotic massage in Bangkok and why intimacy matters in this sexual service. First of all, some participants seek intimacy through engaging in erotic massage because they cannot access it in non-commercial situations such as saunas or clubs, which is related to their deficient (self-esteem of) sexual desirability. This sense of intimacy is generated from forms of physically close interactions which gay men generally enter into only with men who are more or at least equally sexually desirable as they are, according to the 'pecking order'. Therefore, some participants reflected that it is due to their deficient sexual desirability that they find it difficult to have physical intimacy in most non-commercial interactions of sex, which motivated them to engage in erotic massage.

Besides, for some other participants who have no difficulty in having physically close interactions with gay men, they still seek intimacy through erotic massage since the sense of intimacy is also generated from the intangible affection, which they cannot access in non-commercial situations (see 6.3.1). The absence of intimacy from these physically close interactions of sex might originate from the reduced degree of mutual desire between gay men due to one or both sides'



deficient sexual desirability, as the reciprocal causation between intimacy and sexual desirability illustrates. Also, as the previous chapters have demonstrated, the absence of intimacy from these sexual interactions is because they sometimes are just the production of liminality (see 3.5) or gay men's performance of their sexual desirability (see 5.4.4.3).

In contrast to the sexual interactions that occur in non-commercial situations, many participants asserted that erotic massage offered them far more intimacy in an emotional (affectional) sense. For example, when recalling his engagement in erotic massage for the first time, participant Ren underscored that *'the masseurs kept asking me about whether I felt hurt when he was fucking me. I can tell that he really cared about me from his face, which is just like we are a couple'*. The masseur's caring action of confirming Ren's physical sensation brought him the feeling of 'being a couple' that he has never experienced before. Moreover, some participants also indicated that the intimacy they received from erotic massage was also embodied in the form of an intimate relationship that extended beyond the period of this sexual service, as in many cases masseurs kept in contact with them through social media or even meeting again to socialise. Since erotic massage may offer participants different sorts of intimacy, including physically close interactions, affection and even relationships, that some of them are unable to access in other non-commercial situations, these participants expected and tended to seek intimacy through engaging in this sexual service.

However, for many participants, intimacy matters in this context because it achieves two particular effects in the context of prostitution. The first effect is that it relieves participants' moral anxieties about becoming an exploiter in this particular form of prostitution. At first, concerning the stigma of prostitution, it originates from the exploitive nature of this sexual transaction that generally objectifies sex workers as commodities, waiting to be selected and used by clients. From some participants' narrations, even knowing that most of the masseurs work in the erotic massage parlour voluntarily, the guilt of objectifying and dehumanising these sex workers still inevitably arose during their engagements in

this prostitution. Participant Joe recalled *'I was so shocked when seeing those semi-naked boys stood behind the glass wall like a product with their number on the tag attached to them. But they are human beings, you know?'*

This extract exemplifies moral anxieties which many participants experienced. However, I noticed that some participants relieved these anxieties through using the intimacy between them and the masseurs to transform their engagement into a form of 'ethical consumption'. In both Rivers-Moore (2012) and Agard-Jones's (2011) empirical works, they respectively point out that clients of prostitution tend to blur the boundaries of the couple relationship and commercial sex when interacting with sex workers. Cabeza (2009, 2011) further asserts that in order to achieve this blurring, some clients will emphasise the sex worker's poverty and then transform their monetary investments in prostitution from financial transaction into charity.

Participant Wei is a frequenter of erotic massage who repeatedly underlined his humanistic attitude toward sex workers and hence asserted that he is different from other, in his words, 'exploitative clients'. To demonstrate this difference, Wei showed me a conversation on Facebook Messenger between him and a Thai masseur which contains a few pictures of furniture. Wei then explained that these pieces of furniture are all from his sponsorship because he knew the masseur was going to move to a new flat. He said *'we [he and the masseur] are just like friends or even more than that so he likes to spend lots of time chatting with me [via Facebook Messenger]'*. To summarise, through his giving the furniture to and chatting with the masseur, Wei proved that he indeed treated the masseur as a friend and there is a friendship between them, which distinguished him from other sexually exploitative clients in prostitution. This distinction made Wei believe that his engagements in erotic massage as a client are appropriate, which exemplified that how intimacy in this form of prostitution relieved him from the moral anxieties about engaging in prostitution.

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The second effect of intimacy in erotic massage manifests in that it brings participants the feeling they are sexually desirable or their sexual desirability is enhanced. As discussed in the previous section, according to the prevailing hierarchical understanding of sexual activity among participants, the intimacy of a given sexual interaction is an indicator by which to evaluate the participants' sexual desirability. Therefore, many participants revealed that when having highly intimate interactions during erotic massage, they felt they became and were sexually desirable temporarily. This feeling of being and becoming sexually desirable is particularly important for participants when engaging in erotic massage since most of them believed that the sexual practices of prostitution is reserved for gay men who are sexually undesirable. This belief can be better explained with reference to Törnqvist's study on females' romance tourism. Through interviewing female tourists, she found out that buying sex is generally regarded as 'the shameful personal defeat' of the clients since they paid for things that individuals 'are supposed to deserve by virtue of their personality' (Törnqvist 2012, p.32). Echoing Törnqvist, I also noticed that participants' engagements in erotic massage were normally accompanied by their anxiety over deficient sexual desirability.

Some cases in the fieldwork showed that participants utilised the intimacy with masseurs to relieve this anxiety about sexual desirability deficiency. For instance, in interview participant David underscored that during the erotic massage service the masseur '*actively kissed me even with his tongue*' while Albert also mentioned that the masseur cuddled him for a while after passionate sex. Reading these two instances through the lens of the sexual script concept, while 'French kissing' and cuddling are usually seen as interactions reserved for partners or lovers, a particularly intimate feeling is attached to them. Thus, through experiencing these specific interactions in erotic massage, David and Albert showed that there was intimacy between them and the masseurs they met, which demonstrated that they deserved to be desired by others. To sum up, David and Albert's disclosures of their intimate interactions with the masseur suggests that intimacy in erotic massage not only enhances clients self-evaluations of their sexual desirability, but

also is a 'conspicuous interaction' they can show-off to others to build up this sexually desirable image. Thus, participants seek intimacy through erotic massage shows that engaging in this sexual service is indeed a way for them to accrue sexual capital.

Also, this thesis argues that gay Taiwanese men engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok is in part a gateway to the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan. Due to this normalisation, many participants are evaluated as sexually undesirable and hence excluded from experiencing intimacy with others, whether through physical closeness, affection or love. This exclusion motivated participants to travel to Bangkok and engage in erotic massage to seek intimacy, which evinces that their engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok are indeed their escapes from the normalisation of sexual desirability.

Moreover, because their aim in engaging in erotic massage is experiencing intimacy with the masseur and hence obtaining the feeling of being sexually desirable, which is on the basis of their particular belief, namely sexual habitus concerning reciprocal causation between intimacy and sexual desirability. As this sexual habitus is internalised from the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan that embodied in a performative aspect which leads gay men to evaluate the self and others' sexual desirability by sexual practices (include sexual activities) he is experiencing or has experienced. Thus, I argue that participants' engagements in erotic massage and hence sex tourism to Bangkok in part were also their submissions to this normalisation.

### **6.3.3 Money and how authentic intimacy is evaluated**

As illustrated in the previous section, intimacy matters for participants when engaged in erotic massage because it shows their sexual morality and sexual desirability. However, the masseur's offering of intimacy during their service (sometimes) regardless of clients' sexual desirability might be associated with the money they receive from clients. From researching the sex industry in Ho Chi Minh

city, Hoang uncovers the entanglement between intimacy and the price of different forms of prostitution and argues that 'higher paid sex workers doing a greater amount of expressive emotional labour' (Hoang 2010, p.256). This price logic can be seen in many participants' expectations of intimacy with the masseur. An hour of erotic massage service in Bangkok normally costs at least 2000 Baht,<sup>91</sup> which is much more than other socio-sexual spaces that participants go to in this city.<sup>92</sup> This heavy monetary investment made many participants believe that they deserve to experience intimacy with the masseur. For example, participant Benny asked '*without that feeling (intimacy), why should we spend so much money on it [erotic massage]?*' This belief caused a common ambivalence among participants toward the intimacy masseurs offered. On the one hand, they supposed that offering intimacy is one of the masseur's obligations. On the other, they wished this intimacy was more 'authentic', arising from authentically mutual desire between them and the masseur rather than a obligation. This is because intimacy as a kind of obligation to some extent will undermine its function in bringing in participants the feeling of being and becoming sexually desirable.

This ambivalence makes intimacy key in generating participants' victimised feelings. The masseur indeed holds the power to determine how he treats his clients, since he is not obliged to offer intimacy. Therefore, several participants claimed that they have never experienced intimacy during erotic massage and hence felt that they were victimised by the masseur because they did not receive the service they felt they had paid for. Secondly, even if the masseur offers intimacy, the question of whether it is 'authentic' also leads to feelings of victimisation. In fact, many empirical works have noticed this trend of commodifying intimacy in prostitution. As Sanders asserts, intimacy is not only utilised by clients to develop their fantasy of being loved but also manipulated by sex workers to 'rebrand

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<sup>91</sup> The prices were recorded in my fieldwork, conducted between December 2015 and May 2016.

<sup>92</sup> For instance, the entrance fee for gay saunas in Bangkok normally ranges from 150 Baht to 400 Baht and patrons can usually stay till the saunas are closed. Also, from my observations, a night out in Bangkok's gay clubs usually cost participants less than 500 Baht (including the entrance fee and drinks).

prostitution into the romance relationship where bodily and emotional intimacy can be found at a price' (2008a, p.412). Moreover, Bernstein (2007a) further points out the concept of the 'girlfriend experience', where a set of verbal and physical interactions normally conducted between couples are used by sex workers to create the feeling of being in love with their clients, which has become a tradable commodity in prostitution.

Intimacy as a commodity in prostitution has also drawn academic attention to the possibility of co-existence between money and intimacy. Most scholars are sceptical about this coexistence. For example, Egan asserts that 'real connection (love) is almost impossible in a sense of commodification' (2005, p.95) while Huysamen and Boonzaier further claim that 'intimacy between two people is not a commodity that can be bought and sold' (2015, p.549). Summarising these sceptical viewpoints on coexistence between intimacy and money, Zelizert uses the metaphor of 'hostile worlds' to depict that economic transactions and intimate relations belong to distinct domains so that 'any contact between the two contaminates and corrupts both of them' (2006, p.305).

Pertinent to this 'hostile worlds' perspective, I notice that many participants suspected the intimacy they experienced was 'inauthentic' and more like an intimate performance which masseurs gave in order to get more tips. According to many participants' reflections, this belief comes from, firstly, a prevailing anecdote of 'seasickness' (further discussed in 6.3.4.2) among gay Taiwanese men. And secondly, the belief also comes from the comparison. That is, through comparing with other friends' experiences, many participants found out that almost everyone had similar intimate interaction such as cuddling or 'French kiss' with the masseur. Intimacy in erotic massage as a sort of performance led to participants feeling victimised, since this performative and hence inauthentic intimacy failed to bring them the feeling of being and becoming sexually desirable. This reaffirmed the connection between the engagements in erotic massage and deficient sexual desirability, which re-aroused participants' anxiety about lacking sexual desirability.

To cope with the anxiety that pre-exists their engagement in the service and is enhanced by it, I ascertained that participants mainly adopted three different approaches to access 'authentic' intimacy, which caused a set of power dynamics between them and the masseur. The first approach is collecting evidence to prove (specifically to convince themselves) that they and the masseur were mutually desired by each other. These evidences are generally associated with money and physiological reactions. Firstly, echoing the perspective of 'hostile worlds' which asserts that money and intimacy are mutually-exclusive, gay Taiwanese men's experiences of engaging in erotic massage exemplified that although it is true that money may undermine the authenticity of intimacy in this sexual service, many participants utilised money as an indicator for evaluating the degree of authentic intimacy in their interactions.

For example, when talking about their 'real' relationships with the masseur, which extended to having sex again in hotels or dating, many participants were keen to emphasise that there was no extra payment involved in these socio-sexual interactions. The non-transactional nature of these interactions implied the masseur's authentic affection or love toward participants, which distinguished the intimacy from commodified performances and thereby proved its authenticity. As participant Chris mentioned, he and the masseur usually 'go Dutch' when together in Bangkok, while Benny emphasised that the masseur he dated has never requested him to buy anything. Moreover, some other participants also confirmed the authenticity of intimacy between them and masseurs through the latter's monetary investment in their interactions as it to some extent also showed the masseur's authentic desire to maintain their relationship. For instance, participant Alex claimed that the masseurs who he had intimate relationships with usually paid for their taxi to go to the hotel where he stayed. Another participant, Hao, also asserted that the go-go boy he met bought Mandarin-learning materials at his own expense to facilitate communication with him. To sum up, it is through the involvement of money in their interactions with the masseur that participants

evaluated and thereby ‘proved’ the intimacy’s authenticity, which demonstrated that they are somehow sexually desirable.

Secondly, to access authentic intimacy in erotic massage, participants also tended to collect evidence of the masseur’s enjoyment of their sexual interactions, usually in terms of physiological reactions. This tendency led many participants pay exceptional attention to the masseur’s ejaculation because they consider this one of the most reliable indications of the authenticity of the masseur’s affections for them. This is because the ejaculation is theoretically impossible to perform. Furthermore, ejaculation as evidence of the masseur’s authentic sexual desire and affection also originates from its rarity since, generally speaking, a man can achieve it only a few times within one day. Therefore, as participant Jade said, *‘while it [ejaculation] is such a “limited resource”, of course I felt proud when the masseur used it on me. This shows that I’m “special” to him’*. This ‘proof’ then relieved participants’ anxieties relating to sexual desirability deficiency which are generated by their engagement in this sexual service.

### 6.3.4 Achieving authentic intimacy

In the fieldwork I also detected that some participants adopted another two approaches to actively achieve authentic intimacy. However, as will be shown in this section, adoption of these two approaches usually came at the expense of reversing the power relations between them and the masseur, which resonates with Cheng’s (2017, p.226) argument that intimacy is ‘the weapon’ of female sex workers in sexual industry while Frohlic’s (2013, p.155) further claims that intimacy is used as a ‘bargaining chip’ by these workers to ‘counteract and control’ their clients.

#### 6.3.4.1 Second-class logic

As mentioned in the previous chapter (see 6.2.2.1), erotic massage is a form of prostitution that confers on its clients the power of arbitrarily selecting a masseur.



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However, some masseurs, especially the ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ ones, also possess the power to select their clients in a silent and implicit way. The ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ masseur’s selecting power is manifested in not only their distinct attitudes of soliciting when facing different clients, but also some participants’ concessive attitude toward selecting masseurs, which I term ‘second-class logic’. From either others’ or their own experiences, some participants recognised that ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ masseurs are more able to treat clients in an indifferent way according to their sexual habitus. Based on this recognition, therefore, these participants tended to skip the ‘*Tien-Tsai*’ masseurs and instead selected those who are less sexually desirable in terms of physical appearance but who solicited them enthusiastically. Many participants believed this enthusiastic solicitation is a sign which revealed these masseurs’ affections and sexual desires for them, which ensures more authentic intimacy in the subsequent service. For example, when speaking of his experience of having a ‘French kiss’ with the masseur, participant David ascribed this to his ‘second-class logic’ of selecting masseurs:

*I know that those super handsome masseurs won’t treat me well as I’m not their types, so I chose an ordinary looking guy because I thought I was good enough for him. It seems that my strategy worked; I can feel that he [the masseur] really liked me from the way we kissed... You know, in a French way. (David, 30 years old, follow-up interview)*

From this case, the ‘second-class logic’ is indeed part of the aforementioned erotic massage knowledge (see 6.2.3.2), which enabled David to access authentic intimacy with the masseur through lowering his physical requirements to a level that achieves a sense of ‘homogamy’ (see 5.4.1). However, viewed from another perspective, this ‘second-class logic’ in part reversed the power relation between participants and the masseur as it circumscribed the former’s power to freely select masseurs in exchange for the offer of intimacy. The case of ‘second-class logic’ exemplifies that, as clients in erotic massage, some participants tended to cede their power of selecting sexual partners to the masseur. This cession demonstrated

that the reversal of power relations of selecting and being selected between clients and masseurs in erotic massage originates from not only the masseur's superior physical appearance (core sexual capital), but also clients' needs for authentic intimacy.

### 6.3.4.2 'Takeaway' service and seasickness

Participants adopted another active approach to accessing authentic intimacy in erotic massage by increasing monetary investment in this sexual service to, in their words, 'takeaway' the masseur for either a longer session of (sexual) interactions or even transform his service into that of an escort. This 'takeaway' service is usually achieved through participants leaving with the contact information of the masseur and making appointments with him afterwards for a date, usually lasting from one night to a whole day, which normally costs more than erotic massage. For the group of participants who paid for this 'takeaway' service, unlike other gay Taiwanese men, they generally did not think money undermined the authenticity of their intimacy with the masseur. Instead, they regarded it as a medium that creates an ideal setting for them to cultivate intimacy. This ideal setting, according to participant Wei, indicates a particular space-time which is different from the closed massage room and compressed schedule<sup>93</sup> of erotic massage, which is generally dominated by the masseur. As Wei explained, the 'takeaway' service led to a spatial displacement which changed the space in which he interacted with the masseur from the massage room into touristic sites, restaurants or even his own hotel room. This spatial displacement conferred on him the power to express personal opinions and preferences and hence dominate the interactions between them in the direction that fits his fantasy of '*what should a couple do*', namely the sexual script, due to his familiarity with these spaces.

Moreover, this service also offered him longer period of time to go through the items on his checklist of '*what should a couple do*', such as holding hands on the

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<sup>93</sup> The service process of erotic massage usually takes less than one hour.

street or cuddling and falling sleep together. In this case, the spatial displacement of taking away the masseur to places Wei is more familiar with enabled him to recapture the dominance of interactions within this sexual service and led these interactions to develop in line with the sexual script. On the other hand, the time extension of this service also offered participants greater opportunity to carry on this sexual script in a more comprehensive way, which aided them in accessing authentic intimacy with the masseur and in some cases even developed into a long-term relationship.

However, as this spatial displacement and temporal extension are based on clients' heavy investment of money, there is a possibility that the seemingly authentic intimacy developed from '*takeaway*' service is indeed the masseur's more deliberate intimate performance in exchange for more or longer-term financial support. Because participants' use of this service to some extent implies their potential to spend more money on sexual services, this causes them to be regarded as profitable clients by the masseur and so he is willing to perform intimacy. The possibility that a long-term relationship with the masseur is merely his deliberate performance is embodied in an anecdote and even some participants' experiences of 'seasickness'. This term is particularly used as a metaphor in Taiwan to describe the dizzy feeling of the 'sex buyers who are emotionally attached to or in love with sex workers [who] are mocked as "inexperienced" clients among peers' (Chen 2017, p.15). Regarding participants' personal experiences of 'seasickness' from erotic massage, the relationship with the masseur developed from '*takeaway*' service usually ended in the masseur's having affairs and was also accompanied by participants' financial loss. Thus, the intimacy can be viewed as an inauthentic performance that the masseur gave in order to get participants' financial support, which again demonstrates the concept of 'hostile worlds', or the corruption of intimacy is due to the involvement of money.

A typical example of 'seasickness' comes from participant Joe's three-year relationship with a masseur. In the beginning, he was suspicious about the authenticity of this intimacy since it developed from erotic massage. However, Joe

was gradually convinced that the masseur might really love him because, during his trip in Bangkok, the man accompanied him almost everywhere, even to the airport when he departed, without charging any fee. In Hoang's study, she discussed how high-end prostitutes tend to 'engage more in "relational work" and disguise the fact that they are working to generate more money' (Hoang 2010, p.266), which resonates with Joe's 'seasick' experience. The masseur, who was Joe's boyfriend, began to borrow money from him. When Joe discovered his boyfriend's affairs, the masseur disappeared without repaying back his debt of more than 200,000 Baht. This case exemplified that participants' needs for authentic intimacy led to their 'seasickness' and thereby caused double victimisation in terms of both emotional and economic loss. Looked at through the lens of sexual fields, the masseur's competency in providing or performing intimacy is indeed his sexual capital in the sexual field of erotic massage to reverse power relations with clients, which echoes the arguments of current studies of sex tourism that indicate intimacy works as 'weapon' (Cheng 2017) or 'bargaining chip' (Frohlick 2013) for seemingly powerless sex workers.

Furthermore, this 'seasickness' victimises some participants by undermining their (image of) sexual desirability. Reflecting on his 'seasick' experience, Joe stated that he had had dinner a few times with this masseur, his friends and their partners who were '*ugly, old but rich White guys, the typical image of "sugar daddy"*'. Joe then connected the ex-boyfriend's disappearance and debt with the scene of those dinner parties and realised that he was actually one of these 'sugar daddies'. This realisation shows a mutually referential relationship between 'seasickness' and sexual desirability deficiency, a prevalent understanding circulated among many participants. As participant Mei summarised, this relationship indicates that '*Only unattractive guys will be seasick*', which is due to the logic that gay men who are less sexually desirable are less likely to access authentic intimacy in everyday life and so are more easily fooled by intimate performances in erotic massage.

### 6.3.5 Temporary intimacy

As mentioned above, intimacy in erotic massage is not only suspected as an inauthentic performance by participants due to its involvement of money, but also it is another important factor which reverses power relations between participants and prostitutes. In the fieldwork I noticed that, when confronting these potential power reversals, a specific group of participants, mostly are experienced in erotic massage, adopted a particular attitude when interacting with the masseur that I termed 'temporary intimacy'. This constitutes the third approach used to access authentic intimacy. My conversation with participant Jade perfectly illustrates this approach, since he stated that intimacy should absolutely be included in the service but he is not concerned by its authenticity as long as it seems genuine at the time: '*as long as he [the masseur] can made me feel it's true then it's fine*'. To further explain his demand for apparently real intimacy, Jade stated the following:

*It [erotic massage] just needs to fulfil my imagination of being in love with a handsome guy during the massage. So, don't get me wrong, I was aware that it is just a transaction and after that it's over. So, I won't be seasick since I'm a good actor who can freely enter into and exit from this imagination [of being in love]. All I want [from erotic massage] is temporary happiness not a long-term relationship. (Jade, 31 years old, follow-up interview)*

Jade exemplified how the attitude of 'temporary intimacy' was embodied in two ways that facilitate access to 'authentic intimacy'. Firstly, this 'temporary intimacy' redefines the meaning of the authenticity of intimacy, which thereby resolves the contradiction between intimacy and money. From the narrations of this group of participants, they do not just perceive and accept the fact that the intimacy they had with the masseur was indeed performance, but also enjoyed having it. This enjoyment originates from their redefinition of 'authentic intimacy' in erotic massage. That is to say, these participants generally regarded intimacy in this

sexual service as an entertaining experience rather than a serious relationship, which temporarily fulfils their imaginations of being '*in love with a handsome guy*'. Therefore, for them, the 'authenticity' of intimacy with the masseur is not determined by whether the masseur's affection and sexual desire toward them is authentic, but relies on whether the intimate performances that the masseur gave can make them feel 'it is true'.

This redefinition of authentic intimacy in erotic massage resonates with the concept of 'bounded authenticity' which Bernstein (2007a) advances to depict a particular type of service offered by contemporary sexual industries. This service usually offers the buyer a kind of intimacy with a 'clear and bounded' line which is drawn at the end of the transaction to prevent clients from discharging any extra emotional or financial obligations to sex workers as the normal couple does. Following this concept, Bernstein argues that 'the pursuit of sexual intimacy is not hindered but facilitated by its location in the marketplace' (2007b, p.118), which interrogates the perspective of 'hostile worlds' that regards intimacy and money as mutually-exclusive. Echoing this interrogation, Zelizert (2005, 2006) further argues money and intimacy can be compatible with each other on the condition of a 'good match', which means that through adopting proper economic activity to maintain specific forms of relation, one can 'get the economic works' whilst the relationship done and sustain' (Zelizert 2006, p.307). In part, participants' attitudes of 'temporary intimacy' is actually an approach which results in a 'good match' between intimacy and money as the economic activity of erotic massage leads to the fulfilment of 'temporary intimacy', which in turn demonstrates the worthiness of this sexual transaction.

Secondly, the attitude of 'temporary intimacy' as an approach in which participants adopted to access authentic intimacy in erotic massage also because it in part is 'knowledge of erotic massage', or sexual capital that enhanced their sexual desirability. As Jade asserted, adopting this attitude enabled him to freely move in and out of the imagination of '*being in love*' with the masseur, which ensured his sexual pleasure. Also, through underlining his adoption of this 'temporary intimacy'

attitude, Jade distinguished himself from other inexperienced clients who usually get stuck in and then become the victim to 'seasickness'. Because there is a mutually referential relationship between 'seasickness' and sexual desirability deficiency, the distinction Jade made on the basis of his 'temporary intimacy' attitude in fact indirectly showed that he is unlike the 'seasick' victims and hence demonstrated that he is not sexually undesirable. Since one of the important effects of intimacy in erotic massage is bringing sex buyers the feeling of being and becoming sexually desirable. Whilst Jade's adoption of this attitude also achieved this effect, it in part also illustrated that this adoption is a way of accessing 'authentic intimacy'.

Furthermore, as an approach to accessing authentic intimacy, the research argues that 'temporary intimacy' is different from the concept of 'bounded authenticity' (Bernstein 2007a, 2007b). This difference can be explained from the cases in which participants were not always that 'mobile' as they asserted with regard to moving in and out of this imagined affection, since this mobility is determined by to what extent that they affect the given masseur. A representative example is participant Chris who complained that some masseurs are 'too serious' about intimacy and extend it beyond the duration of the sexual service by becoming emotional when they find out he has met other masseurs which he considered '*very unprofessional*'. As a point of contrast, Chris mentioned Sony, a masseur he regularly met either in the massage parlour or '*takeaway*' service, who always offered a clear 'bounded authenticity'. As Chris recalled, one time they encountered each other in a club and, when he tried to hug him, Sony just pushed him away and said '*I can make you happy but you have to pay*'. After he gave Sony some money, Chris described that '*He immediately switched into a "love" model who acted as if we were a real couple*'.

When I further asked Chris whether he had fallen in love with Sony, he hesitated for a while and then replied: '*Yes, I had run after him before but he rejected me. However, I still appreciate his professionalism of drawing such a clean line. Also, I'm happy in our relationship, which is just like an entertaining experience that shows*

*that both of us are “rational” enough.’* This case discloses two crucial aspects in which ‘temporary intimacy’ differs from the concept of ‘bounded authenticity’. In the first place, it shows that even in the condition of erotic massage, intimacy is not a state that clients can detach from at all times as the concept of ‘boundary authenticity’ asserts, especially when their authentic affection is involved. For instance, it was because Chris did not love most of the masseurs, he then viewed intimacy in erotic massage as merely entertaining experiences which he had the mobility to moving in and out of. However, Chris’s relationship with Sony exemplifies that the intimacy in erotic massage sometimes cannot be cut off clearly since he was in love with Sony.

This case also indicates that the attitude of ‘temporary intimacy’ to interact with the masseur when engaging in erotic massage is not always actively adopted by participants as the concept of ‘bounded authenticity’ argues. Instead, in some cases, adopting this attitude to interact with the masseur is just participants’ passive responses to the reality that the masseurs are less likely to fall in love with them. For example, Chris’s adoption of the attitude of ‘temporary intimacy’ toward his relationship with Sony was more like a self-defence which he put up in order to sustain his sexual desirability. First of all, it was through defining his relationship with Sony as ‘temporary intimacy’ that was based on the latter’s ‘professionalism’ that Chris eased the embarrassment of Sony rejecting his advances. Also, adopting this attitude allowed him to avoid ‘seasickness’. Whilst rejection and ‘seasickness’ undermine a gay man’s sexually desirable image, this case indicates that ‘temporary intimacy’ in erotic massage is not just a service of ‘bounded authenticity’ that participants seek, but an approach they adopt to defend their sexual desirability against potential damage which originates from engaging in this sexual service.

The workings of this attitude further supports the argument that participants’ sex tourism to Bangkok is a sort of submission to the Taiwanese normalisations of gay men’s sexual desirability (in a performative aspect). They remained reliant on the reciprocal causation between intimacy and sexual desirability, which originates



from this normalisation, demonstrating their desirability even as they engaged in erotic massage, which is normally seen as the reserve of less desirable men. However, participants' adoptions also represented their renegotiation to normalisation. Through adopting this attitude, participants redefined the meaning of intimacy so that even if their intimacy with the masseur was performance, it would not reduce their sexual desirability in the way that Taiwanese normalisations of gay men's sexual desirability (in a performative aspect) suggest.

### 6.4 Conclusion

From gay Taiwanese men's experiences of engaging in erotic massage in Bangkok, this chapter has explored the multiple facets of victimisation in prostitution. To further explore this multiplicity through the lens of sexual fields theory, this chapter offers an alternative understanding of what power and intimacy in sexual interactions mean to clients of prostitution, and also sheds new light on this theoretical framework.

This chapter has addressed the voices of clients, frequently overlooked in existing literature on sex tourism, illustrating that they might also be victimised in various senses in the transnational sex trade, including bodily, emotionally, economically and in terms of self-esteem. However, what needs to be underlined first is that since erotic massage is usually carried out in private spaces, empirical data about participants' victimisation is produced mostly from the stories they told in interviews which, as Plummer (1995) reminds us, are productions of contingent situations that respond to particular time-space and audiences (see 2.3.3). Therefore, I am aware that clients are not the only victim in erotic massage because participants' selective representations are not entirely trustworthy. They omit their own exploitations and possibly exaggerate their victimisation. For instance, while many participants asserted their victimisation due to the masseur's clinical attitude, they indeed ignored that these masseurs were also victimised by having to offer 'repressive emotional labour', a concept that Hoang (2010) establishes to describe how sex workers are usually forced to 'suppress emotions of disgust that

they feel toward their client' (Hoang 2010, p.256), which highlights that the role of the victim and therefore the power relationship in prostitution are dynamic.

Analysing participants' experiences of engaging in erotic massage in Bangkok, the chapter elucidates that power relations are not determined by gender and economic status alone, as current studies argue. More importantly, their sexual capital is in question. This research demonstrates that money, as an advantageous form of sexual capital, confers power onto participants to select the masseur and receive a unilateral service, a privilege they do not have in non-commercial sex situations such as saunas and clubs because this generally belongs to '*Tien-Tsai*'. However, some participants' victimised feelings also developed from the power reversal between them and the masseur, which was due to their lack of other forms of sexual capital: sexual skills/knowledge, physical appearance, knowledge of erotic massage, second language competency and local residency.

On the other hand, the finding that different forms of sexual capital determine the power relation between participants and the masseur in turn sheds new light on sexual fields theory in the aspect of demonstrating that a sexual field is constituted by different elements. These different forms of sexual capital in Bangkok's erotic massage parlours in part show that this particular form of prostitution has a nuanced structure of desire and hence is a slightly different sexual field from other sexual fields because of its particular interactional context(s),<sup>94</sup> spatial design and transnational situations, all of which are crucial elements that constitute a sexual field but are yet to be discussed in current scholarship.

This chapter also offers an alternative understanding of power and intimacy within erotic massage. I argue that participants seek power and intimacy in this context to access the feeling of being or becoming sexually desirable. Concerning the power onto which participants wielded in erotic massage, namely selecting

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<sup>94</sup> For instance, its transactional nature, the pressures of selecting the masseur from *Mamasan* and the masseur's service are indeed without any explicit instruction.

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masseur and receiving unilateral sexual service, is normally held by '*Tien-Tsai*' gay men exclusively. Therefore, possessing this power made some of them feel they are sexually desirable. Likewise, the chapter also illustrated that participants did not engage in erotic massage purely for intimacy's sake, but also to distinguish themselves from the 'sexual exploiter' and 'undesirable others', typical images that relate to the clients of prostitution. Having intimacy with the masseur has become a 'conspicuous interaction', or sexual capital (see 5.4.2). Many participants perform this to build up their respectable (sexually moral) and sexually desirable images in order to sustain or even enhance their sexual desirability after engaging in erotic massage, which is normally seen as a sexual activity reserved for sexually undesirable gay men.

Participants' needs for power and intimacy in erotic massage also highlight that their engagements in this service and sex tourism to Bangkok more generally are responses to the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan. First of all, this feeling is something many participants have hardly experienced in their daily lives due to the 'pecking order' in Taiwan, a result of the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability. Thus, these participants' repeated engagements in erotic massage to access this feeling when travelling to Bangkok in part can be viewed as their escapes from this normalisation.

Moreover, the aim of engaging in erotic massage is to access the feeling of being sexually desirable through having power and intimacy, which is based on a belief in reciprocal causation between these elements and sexual desirability. This belief is indeed part of the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan that is embodied in the performative aspect, which leads gay men to evaluate their own and others' sexual desirability based on sexual practices he is experiencing or has experienced. Thus, I argue that participants' engagements in erotic massage and hence sex tourism to Bangkok are also their submissions to this normalisation. However, as exemplified in section 6.3.5, participants' adoptions 'temporary intimacy' also indicate renegotiations to this normalisation. Through adopting this attitude, participants redefined the meaning of intimacy so that even if it is a

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performance, it does not reduce their sexual desirability as the Taiwanese normalisations of this notion (in a performative aspect) would suggest.

# Chapter 7

## Conclusion

### 7.1 Gay men's tourism: The gateways to normalisations

Through the discussions of the previous four empirical chapters, this thesis has demonstrated various ways that gay Taiwanese men seek to engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok in an attempt for being/becoming a 'normal' gay man. Their travels to Bangkok could thus be read against a backdrop of the normalisation of gay man in Taiwan – the everyday politics that reconfigures gay men's sexual morality and sexual desirability. Here I summarize this argumentation through four points.

Firstly, the thesis reveals that the liminality that generated from the time-space of travelling has been a key driver for many participants engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok. Such a liminality has led the participants to switch to the 'Bangkok mode' and hence engaged in variegated transgressive sexual practices that they have never done or did not dare to experience in their daily lives. Because these practices are generally associated with the social stigma of, in their words, the 'immoral' gay man. For a majority of my participants, to maintaining a respectable (sexually moral) image is essential in order to being a 'normal' gay man. Therefore, this thesis considers participants' engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok as an escape from the normalisation of gay men's sexual morality in Taiwan, which enabled them to fulfill their desires for specific sexual practices and; meanwhile, remained being a 'normal' gay man in daily lives in Taiwan. Besides, we may also put it the other way around: some of the participants shared their experiences that by engaging in transgressive sexual practices they find the alternative gateway to become a 'normal' gay man (see section 3.4.2). This is because the workings of normalisation, in an opposite way, has been interpreted amongst some other gay

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Taiwanese men as a kind of sexual morality which requires one to have adequate sexual experiences. Viewed from this perspective, participants engaged in sex tourism to Bangkok were also yielding to the normalisation of gay men's sexual morality in Taiwan.

Secondly, by developing the conception of 'sexual mobility', the thesis has suggested that the participants often sense their sexual desirability enhanced in Bangkok. For them, travelling to Bangkok is thus become a synonym of having more opportunities of socio-sexual interactions with other gay men. This thesis further unpacks the conception of 'sexual mobility' into two distinct and interrelated ways. On the one hand, Thailand is perceived as an advantageous sexual field with a particular structure of desire (the 'Eastern Asian orientation') such that these gay Taiwanese men's 'Han ethnicity' were appreciated and thus their physical appearance are rendered sexually desirable. On the other hand, their Taiwanese nationality, in contrast to the negative image of gay Chinese tourists, has bolstered them confidence in exploring 'a democratic sexual field' whereby plural structures of desire allow 'every gay man finds his own market'. As such, a 'democratic sexual field' such as Bangkok is in stark contrast to cities in Taiwan. Because the latter were a cluster of places manifests with a highly hegemonic structure of desire that values young, straight-acting, muscular and tanned men. Sexual mobility, in this specific context, could be understood as a gateway that empowers those 'sexually undesirable' gay Taiwanese men who were once ignored or excluded in gay men's sexual-sociality in daily lives.<sup>95</sup> In brief, sex tourism to Bangkok could partially be seen as an escape from the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan.

Thirdly, the thesis also illustrates that many participants engaged in sex tourism to Bangkok in order to accrue their sexual capital. The fact that many participants felt anxious about their lacks of sexual desirability and seek to regain confidence

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<sup>95</sup> Here the term 'sexually undesirable' indicates to gay men whose physical appearances do not articulate with Taiwan's hegemonic structure of desire

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through sex tourism in Bangkok has revealed the dual forces. On the one hand, their estranged socio-sexual experiences in Taiwan drove them out to seek alternatives. On the other, Bangkok as a space with variegated socio-sexual opportunities also attests their fluctuated sexual desirability. Participants who have found their sexual desirability enhanced start to reckon that they resemble to their gay peers. Again, this unveils how being sexually desirable is essential for being a 'normal' gay man. In this way, participants' engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok can be understood as a submission to the normalisation of sexual desirability in Taiwan. That is to say, the ephemeral escape from this normalisation is somewhat limited because a majority of participants still shared the normalised sexual habitus that internalised from Taiwanese society. In this sense, the specific personal characteristics they learnt and the 'conspicuous interactions' they have experienced to create sexually desirable image when travelled to Bangkok can be the sexual capital to enhance their sexual desirability.

Lastly, the thesis observes that sex tourism to Bangkok presents processes of escaping from, submitting to, and/or the renegotiating with the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability through the empirical stance of participants' engagement in erotic massage. Erotic massage is one specific entry whereby even gay men who are less favorable in the pecking order are warranted. As such, to engaging in erotic massage becomes an important gateway for those 'sexually undesirable' participants to escape from the normalisation of sexual desirability bound to Taiwanese gay culture. Moreover, in this thesis I further unpack the dialectic relationship among power, intimacy, and sexual desirability. In a way, participants' needs for engaging in erotic massage are, to be specific, often reflected that such sexual practices confer them power and intimacy and generate the confidence of being sexually desirable. In this case, sexual desirability and power and/or intimacy shape a reciprocal causation. As exemplified in the chapters above (see 6.2.1 and 6.3.1), such a reciprocal causation is derived from another type of normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan. Thereby gay men's sexual desirability is evaluated through the sexual practices they are having or have experienced. Hence, participants' engagements in erotic massage, and broadly

speaking, sex tourism to Bangkok, once again demonstrates their submissions to the normalisation of sexual desirability.

### **7.2 What we can learn from gay men's sex tourism to Bangkok**

Through analyzing gay Taiwanese men's engagement in sex tourism to Bangkok, the thesis makes contribution to four distinct aspects. Its empirical contribution lies in extending current understanding of research realm of gay tourism, sex tourism, prostitution and geographies of sexualities. Theoretically, this thesis contributes to the conceptual exploration of both 'liminality' and 'sexual field'. Moreover, this thesis engages in the methodological debates on the possibility of 'singular truth of narratives' and appropriateness of 'researcher's sexual participations'. Lastly, this thesis articulates how such a research contributes to understanding the social implications for Taiwanese society.

#### **7.2.1 Extending academic understandings of gay and sex tourism**

One of the most important contributions which this thesis makes is extending the understandings of four research fields. Firstly, regarding gay tourism, this research offers an alternative perspective to explicate why gay men travel abroad. This is distinct from existing studies that normally grounded upon the experiences of Western White gay men and were conducted a decade ago – a time when most of the societies were more sexually conservative. Specifically, the research illuminates how - the participants' experiences of engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok – could shed light on a specific group of non-Western gay men who are from one of the most sexually 'liberal' societies in East Asia – with relatively higher tolerance toward homosexuality – and are travelling for being or becoming a 'normal' gay man. To reiterate, in this non-Western and contemporary (more sexually liberal) context, gay men still travelling abroad to establish their gay identity, which seems to be akin to their Western and preceding counterparts. However, the gay identity



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that gay Taiwanese men established through engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok is distinct from what the extant studies on gay tourism have indicated. In this non-Western and contemporary context, gay identity is no longer a sort of sexual orientation that a gay man self-identifies, it is but a personal image of sexual morality and sexual desirability that he performs in order to gain the approval by other gay men. Only when a gay man develops socio-sexual interactions with other gay men can he gain such approval of being as a 'normal' gay man. Moreover, for my research participants, sex tourism to Bangkok is a prerequisite for them to be able to participate in socio-sexual interactions with other gay men as they confront different forms of normalisations relating to sexual morality and desirability in ordinary lives in Taiwan. Thus, engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok has emerged as one of the crucial approaches for gay Taiwanese men to establish their gay identity.

Secondly, the thesis also works to bridge studies on sex tourism to the terrain of gay tourism. By doing so, this thesis sheds new light on the phenomena of how sex entangles with tourism. The thesis expounds what has underpinned gay men tourists' tendency of engaging in different forms of sexual practices is not least because of liminality – as explained in a majority of scholarship on heterosexuals' sex tourism. The insufficiency of the liminality concept looms large as the participants' experiences in Bangkok have shown the absence of the fundamental features of liminality, namely the subversion of social orders and the elimination of hierarchical distinction. Instead, my fieldwork has demonstrated that participants' sexual practices were associated with sexual desirability of others and of themselves. As such, the thesis argues that the sexual fields theory could be an alternative and insightful theoretical framework to explain why gay Taiwanese men engaging in sex tourism to Bangkok. It finds that Bangkok is a particular sexual field which enhances participants' sexual desirability when they travelled to this city and hence brought in far more opportunities for having socio-sexual interactions. This leads to their repeated engagement in sex tourism to Bangkok. Moreover, the sexual fields theory further applies to the fact that gay Taiwanese men's Bangkok travels could usually enhance their sexual desirability by means of

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the mechanism of learning, enacting and performing sexual capital. While Bangkok is such a sexual field which offers participants more opportunities of developing socio-sexual interactions, the thesis asserts that their sex tourism in Bangkok is in order to accrue sexual capital, which led to their enhanced sexual desirability in Taiwan.

Thirdly, the thesis also provides distinct insights for prostitution research. In particular, the thesis contributes to clarifying the dynamics of power relations between clients and sex workers; besides, the clients' needs for having power and intimacy in prostitution through the lens of sexual fields theory. Differing from most of the current studies that generally assume sex workers are inevitable victims within prostitution due to their gender and disadvantageous economic status, this research elucidates that participants as the clients could also be victimised in erotic massage. Since this sexual service is indeed a particular sexual field and the power relations between masseurs and their clients are dynamic - as both parties possess different levels of the sexual capital. In addition, the thesis argues that erotic massage as a specific sexual field has shown that clients are seeking not only for having power and intimacy but the feelings that they are (becoming) sexually desirable even such an enhancement is ephemeral.

Lastly, the thesis's empirical focus on gay Taiwanese men's sex tourism in Bangkok also bring forward lived experiences of non-Western gay men, which have not been explored in extant studies on geographies of sexualities. Through investigating participants' journeys to Bangkok, the thesis presents the multiplicity of (South-) East Asian gay men's sexual spaces, practices, identities and sociality as well as the interrelations among these aspects, which unveils a sketch of Taiwanese (homo)sexual culture. Moreover, this research particularly regards East Asian (Taiwanese) gay men as the travelling subject whom travel to a Southeast Asian country/city, which differs from current research that mostly posits non-Western gay men (and their bodies) as locals/object and waiting for being consumed by tourists from North America and Western Europe. This particular 'intra-Asian' context offers the thesis a distinct perspective to examine the 'south-south'

encounters between (South) East Asian gay men and their bodies, desires and, homonormativity. These encounters generate enriched materials for reflecting extant theoretical debate within geographies of sexuality such as homonormativity. The thesis demonstrates that homonormativity is indeed a heterogeneous and socio-spatially specified entity. By analysing gay Taiwanese men's sexual-sociality through the lens of sex tourism, the research discloses this group of sexual minorities also being oppressed and dominated by homonormativity that akin to what has happened in Western social context, which embodies in the forms of exclusion of 'unqualified' gay men on the basis of desexualisation, lookism, ageism, fatphobia, and sissyphobia. However, the research also finds that sexual liberation— a radical form of sexual politics that generally seen as the opposite of homonormativity in Western context, has been an alternative form of normalisation in Taiwan that leads some gay Taiwanese men to coerce themselves to be sexually liberal in exchange for becoming 'normal' among their peers. This finding illustrates firstly, homonormativity is a heterogeneous entity that composed of different and even contradicting normalisations that contest with each other. Secondly, the difference of homonormativity between Taiwanese and Western society also reveals that this conceptual institution has its geographical variations that associate with nuanced socio-cultural context of each country. This association would be a far-reaching topic for future research in geographies of sexualities.

### **7.2.2 Rethinking theories of liminality and sexual field**

Through the theoretical lenses of liminality and sexual field, the thesis examines gay Taiwanese men's engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok and offers analyses as an intervention for reconsidering the theoretical revisability of these two theories. Firstly, this thesis exposes the limitation of the theory of liminality by revealing the fact that participants did not switch to the 'Bangkok mode' in their entire travels to Bangkok. That is to say, the situations which liminality enacts and hence makes an impact on tourists' engagements in transgressive sexual practice is multiple; it may include specific space, timespan, and a group of people. Multiple

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scales of liminality have illuminated how liminality is generated within tourism: It is more than just spatial displacement, place myth, and time compression as extant research has pointed out, but also the particular physical environment, timing and people's unconscious collective behaviour or a person's conscious use of specific tactics. Besides, as shown in my fieldwork, participants not only unconsciously immersed in liminality and switched to the 'Bangkok mode' but also lived out this mode with consciousness, regardless of their agency or social structure. This finding leads the thesis to rethink the relationship between liminality and tourists' transgressive sexual practices in Bangkok that mainly manifest in two aspects. First of all, the thesis illustrates that liminality was not always the cause but rather an excuse for participants to legitimatising their engagements in transgressive sexual practices in Bangkok. Moreover, the thesis also argues that liminality is an alternative form of social order that coerces participants into accepting other gay men to impose transgressive sexual practices on them during the liminal time-space regardless of their willingness.

Secondly, some theoretical reflections on the theory of sexual field are also offered in this research. In particular, it has rethink what to be considered a sexual field and sexual capital? In terms of the sexual field, the thesis unveils its underexploredly multiple scales relating to socio-spatiality and temporality as well as how different elements constitute them. To expound the idea of multiple scales of sexual field, this research exemplifies how a scale of sexual field could emerge through a particular nation-state (for example Thailand), socio-sexual space (for example sauna Chakran), circuit of people (for example during Songkran), and form of sexual practice (for example prostitution). Different scales of sexual field have demonstrated various ways in which sexual field is constituted not just by differential sexual sub-cultures but also specific spatial-design, people with whom coexist in the same time-space, and interactional context (i.e. the erotic massage in Bangkok is a particular interactional context for gay Taiwanese men, which makes this form of prostitution a slightly different sexual field from others).

Additionally, in an effort of exploring the conception of sexual capital, the research demonstrates various mechanisms that gay men accrue sexual capital in redefining its nature through presenting its alternative forms. This is not yet fully discussed in extant literature on sexual field theory. First, the thesis points out that for a gay man, sexual capital is not merely accrued through accessing to specific sexual fields that match with his portfolio of sexual capital. Because sexual capital is not only a 'situational outgrowth' of sexual field but also a portable asset which manifests in the form of 'core sexual capital'. 'Core sexual capital' is constituted by some sorts of personal characteristics - such as youth and physical fitness - that are generally more valuable than other sexual capital in terms of enhancing an individual's sexual desirability. Because they are either widely applicable or prioritised across most of the sexual fields. Furthermore, the thesis also elucidates that accruing sexual capital relies on not merely an individual's willingness but also a particular learnt competency, which as I argue, is a form of 'infrastructural sexual capital'. This 'infrastructural sexual capital' indicates that given personal characteristics are often seemed irrelevant to an individual's sexual desirability but actually play a critical role in aiding him/her to accrue other forms of sexual capital. Lastly, the research also illuminates that a gay man's sexual desirability is not just an essential entity that is composed of his personal characteristics as current research asserts but also a malleable image in a Butlerian sense of performativity. That is to say, the sexual desirability is constructed through repetitive performing 'conspicuous interactions' that represent an individual's superior tier of sexual desirability. Accordingly, the experiences of having and having had these 'conspicuous interactions' present another form of sexual capital. Through showing-off and comparing these particular personal experiences with others, a gay man could also accrue sexual capital and thus enhance his sexual desirability.

### 7.2.3 Methodological debate reconsidered

Also, the fieldwork for this research also offers an intervention to two long-lasting methodological debates, namely the possibility of 'singular truth' of participants' narratives/practices and the appropriateness of a 'researcher's sexual

participations' in the fieldwork. Both are intimately associated with the mixed research methods and identities of mine that I adopted in the fieldwork. Firstly, concerning the debate on 'singular truth', the mixed methods I employed combining ethnography of 'following' and in-depth interview have helped to cast doubt on the 'singular truth' as participants' narratives are either inconsistent in itself or contradict to their sexual practices. The inconsistency and contradiction in narratives and practices have led to the methodological debate on the existence of 'singular truth' in a narrative-driven approach of data analysis. Appropriating from Plummer's (1995) symbolic interactionist perspective on narrative production, this thesis has revisited these inconsistent and contradictory empirical data. It argues that there is no 'singular truth' of them as each of participants' narrative and sexual practice is authentic. Because the inconsistency and contradiction within/between these narratives and practices also convey different sorts of information such as particular situations (time-space and audiences), historical/cultural context of Taiwanese society, and participants' intentions in producing these narratives. Therefore, by incorporating all of these inconsistent and contradictory empirical data into analysis indeed offers this research diverse and comprehensive understandings on participants' narratives and sexual practices. This also leads the argumentation it makes to be 'closer' to the truth(s). Also, since these empirical data was not just collected but also produced through a set of 'joint actions' between the participants and me, which include how I presented myself to them as well as how I elicited and interpreted their narratives and sexual practices. Hence, although these narratives and sexual practices are inconsistent and even contradictory with each other, all of them are partially represent sorts of truth(s), which again demonstrate that there is no 'singular truth'.

Secondly, the research also involves in the debate on the appropriateness for the researcher to participate in sexual practices in the fieldwork. This is mainly associated with the ethical and practical concerns. Whilst many scholars underscore that researchers participating in sexual practices in the fieldwork will inevitably lead to the exploitation of their participants and obstacle for collecting data, the thesis indicates that before debating the appropriateness of researcher's

sexual participation in the fieldwork, a deliberate reconsideration on what this participation means including with whom and in which way, is necessary. Through reflecting multiple sexual identities, namely the 'promiscuous peer', 'sexualised object' and 'tour guide of sex tourism' that I adopted in the fieldwork, the thesis exemplifies different forms of a researcher's sexual participation, which include having socio-sexual interactions with non-participants, showing or concealing his/her sexual desirability and offering information about socio-sexual spaces to participants. These forms of sexual participation were conformed to the research ethics as it in part enabled me to build up a reciprocal rapport with participants. Moreover, they also present a praxis of my queer epistemology to deconstruct the 'sexual hierarchy'. Also, the sexual participation is in line with the practicality of conducting fieldwork, which facilitate my data collection and interpretation. Thus, this thesis argues that it could be appropriate for a researcher to mixing his/her sexual identities with the research identity in the fieldwork through engaging in different forms of sexual participation. Besides, in so doing, it could even be beneficial when conducting the fieldwork in both senses of research ethics and practicality.

### **7.2.4 The social implications of this research**

By means of analysing gay Taiwanese men's experiences of travelling to Bangkok, this research also brings forth three implications to Taiwanese society. Firstly, it challenges the negative stereotype of gay men's sex tourism through uncovering multiple purposes that they engage in this type of tourism. That is, although this research discloses that many participants travelled to Bangkok were motivated by having socio-sexual interactions, it also finds out they indeed utilised these interactions to achieve some other purposes such as learning to be a 'qualified gay man', building up (resilient) self-esteem of sexual desirability, performing sexually desirable image of the self and acquiring feelings of intimacy. This finding elucidates multiple facets of gay men's engagements in sex tourism. Other than the negative stereotype that regards such engagements as an embodiment of their promiscuousness; this type of tourism is identified in this research as an important

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gateway for them to enhance sexual desirability and hence establish their identity as a 'normal' gay man.

Secondly, the thesis also reflects on the social reality that nowadays gay Taiwanese men remain confronting different oppressions from both outside and inside of gay community. As such, I demonstrate that (sex) tourism is indeed a 'serious' domain of inquiry. In the fieldwork, participants' self-coercion of (not) engaging in particular sexual practices has shown that they are oppressed by different normalisations of gay men concerning sexual morality and sexual desirability in Taiwan. Also, the prevalence of anxiety about the lack of sexual desirability thus generates gay men's self-doubt of not being a 'normal' gay man among participants. This unveils that even in a widely perceived sexually 'liberal' society like Taiwan with higher tolerant of homosexuality, many participants remain suffering from the insecure feeling of their gay identity. This feeling is associated with, as aforementioned in the thesis, the pecking order among gay Taiwanese men. Such a pecking order is originated from the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan and constitutes a form of oppression to gay Taiwanese men.

Thirdly, the research also proposes that engaging in sex tourism (not limit to Bangkok) might be a way to cope with the oppression that results from the normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability. As addressed in chapter 5, the old-hand participants are more likely to hold the 'resilient self-esteem'. This allows their self-evaluations of sexual desirability to be disconnected with socio-sexual interactions they are experiencing or has experienced such that they were usually far less anxious about whether they are a 'normal' gay man. This 'resilient self-esteem' is related to their enriched experiences of going to socio-sexual spaces. Such self-esteem is in part gained from their repeated engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok. These repeated engagements led them to 'see through' the occurrences of socio-sexual interaction are contingent as they are determined by multiple factors rather than just an individual's sexual desirability. Furthermore, I also noticed that these old-hand participants generally obtain a more diverse sexual habitus, namely admiring broader types of gay men regarding physical



appearance. This might also relate to their repeated engagements in sex tourism to Bangkok. One of many examples is from participant Scott whom claimed that originally, he felt disgusted with hairy men or effeminate men. However, after travelling to Bangkok, his sexual habitus has broadened. This broadening is embodied in Scott's having sex with not only hairy men but also began a relationship with an effeminate 'twink' since he now finds different types of gay men sexy. Therefore, the research assumes that as more gay Taiwanese men travelled abroad to the sexual field(s) that differ from Taiwan, the more democratic Taiwan as a sexual field might develop into since it would be composed of individuals with diverse sexual habitus. This assumptive democratic sexual field supposes to undermine the dominance of extant normalisation of gay men's sexual desirability in Taiwan. This may correspondingly decrease the anxiety about sexual desirability deficiency among gay Taiwanese men as each of them are more likely to be regarded as sexually desirable by others.

### **7.3 What gay men's sex tourism to Bangkok might tell us more about**

In the last section of this chapter and thesis, I advance two aspects relating to the limitation on; meanwhile, direction for future research in which generate from this project. Firstly, I suggest that the nexus between gay identity and (image of) sexual morality and/or sexual desirability is worthy to be further unpacked. This thesis originally aims to explore gay Taiwanese men's extraordinarily intensive engagements in sexual practices when they travelling to Bangkok. When analysing the empirical data, I find that these practices intimately are associated with different forms of normalisation of gay men's sexual morality and sexual desirability in Taiwan. To reiterate, these normalisations affect socio-sexual interactions in which participants have experienced and thus determined their self-evaluations on whether they are a 'normal' gay man, namely the gay identity. However, due to this finding emerges in the final stage of writing up this thesis, I had been unaware of the nexus between a gay men's gay identities and their

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(images of) sexual morality and desirability when undertaking the fieldwork. Thus, I did not further probe participants why being respectable (sexually moral) and sexual desirable allows them to feel they are or become a 'normal' gay man. The tight timeframe also does not me to conduct more follow-up interviews to recollect relevant empirical data, which imparts the limitation on this thesis to further clarify this nexus. This on the other way around, also elicits a prospective topic to investigate in the future.

Secondly, another limitation on this thesis resides in its lack of discussion on the intersection between gay men's sexual morality and sexual desirability. The preceding chapters usually discuss these two attributes in a parallel fashion and have not yet unveiled that they are indeed intersected in many ways. According to my preliminary analysis, for example, many participants regard (image of) sexual morality as a form of sexual capital since it represents a gay man's sexual desirability. There is a shared belief circulating among participants that more sexually desirable gay men are generally also more respectable and less likely engaging in 'immoral' sexual practices such as prostitution or group sex in the 'orgy party'. Because their advantageous sexual desirability has already offered them sufficient opportunities for socio-sexual interactions, it is unnecessary for this type of gay to engage in sexual practices in which will jeopardise their respectable images. Thus, from a performative perspective, being sexually respectable also implies a gay man is sexually desirable. On the other hand, the fieldwork for this also reveals sexual desirability is a sort of sexual morality. Not a few participants asserted that the engagements in 'immoral' sexual practices turn to be 'respectable' in the conditions that the given sexual partner is sexually desirable, so will sustain a gay man's (image of) sexual morality. However, considering the limited space of the thesis, I suggest that the intersection and/or mutual conversion between sexual morality and sexual desirability is an uncharted realm which deserves another research project for further exploring.

# Appendix

## Appendix 1 Table of interviewee (pre-ethnography)

	Name and role in the research	Age	Relationship status	Times of visiting Bangkok	Spaces visited in Bangkok
1	Scott (Interviewee) <sup>96</sup>	42	Single	10+ <sup>97</sup>	DJ Station FAKE Underground 39 (sauna) Chakran Mania Babylon (sauna) Heaven Dream Boy HERO Prince (erotic massage) Banana (erotic massage) V-club (erotic massage)
2	Joe (interviewee)	51	Single	10+	DJ Station FAKE Chakran Mania Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) HERO Prince (erotic massage) Arena (erotic massage)
3	Gary (interviewee)	25	Single	0	None
4	Mouse (interviewee)	38	Partnered	10+	DJ Station FAKE G.O.D. Chakran Mania Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy Jupiter (go-go bar)

<sup>96</sup> In the research, the role 'interviewee' indicates to people with whom I interviewed in Taiwan but did not follow in Bangkok

<sup>97</sup> Here I use 10+ to indicate the times these gay men travel to Bangkok is because most of them cannot remember the exact number of it

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					HERO
5	Andy (interviewee)	31	Single	1	DJ Station FAKE Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy Prince (erotic massage)
6	Marc (interviewee)	38	Partnered	8	DJ Station FAKE G.O.D. Mania R3 Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy Jupiter (go-go bar) HERO Prince (erotic massage)
7	Chris (interviewee)	34	Single	10+	DJ Station FAKE G.O.D. Chakran Mania R3 Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy Jupiter (go-go bar) HERO Prince (erotic massage) Banana (erotic massage)
8	Pony (participant) <sup>98</sup>	37	Single	6	DJ Station G.O.D. Mania R3 Babylon (sauna) Jupiter (go-go bar)
9	Cat (author of gay guidebook)	52	Single	10+	DJ Station FAKE G.O.D. Telephone (gay bar) Chakran Mania Underground 39 (sauna) Heaven Babylon (sauna)

<sup>98</sup> <sup>98</sup> In the research, the role ‘participant’ indicates to people whom I not only interviewed in Taiwan but also followed in Bangkok

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					Dream Boy TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) HERO Prince (erotic massage) Arena (erotic massage)
10	Ying (author of gay guidebook)	34	Partnered	10+	DJ Station FAKE G.O.D. Telephone (gay bar) G-star (gay bar) Chakran Mania R3 Underground 39 (sauna) Heaven Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) HERO Prince (erotic massage) Arena (erotic massage) V-club (erotic massage) Banana (erotic massage)
11	Aven (interviewee)	41	Single	8	DJ Station FAKE G.O.D. G-star (gay bar) Mania R3 Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy Jupiter (go-go bar)
12	Oli (participant)	28	Single	1	None
13	Ring (participant)	27	Partnered	0	None
14	Rabbit (participant)	34	Single	6	DJ Station FAKE G.O.D. Chakran Mania R3 Babylon (sauna) Dream boy
15	B	30	Single	5	DJ Station

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	(participant)				FAKE G.O.D. Chakran Mania R3 Babylon (sauna) Dream boy TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar)
16	A-Fu (interviewee)	45	Single	10+	DJ Station Telephone (gay bar) Mania Underground 39 (sauna) Heaven Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) HERO Prince (erotic massage) Arena (erotic massage)
17	Jade (participant)	31	Single	4	DJ Station FAKE G.O.D. Mania R3 Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar)
18	Vito (author of gay guidebook, international student, Mamasan of one erotic massage parlor)	33	Single	10+	DJ Station FAKE G.O.D. G-Star Telephone (gay bar) Chakran Mania R3 Underground 39 Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) HERO Prince (erotic massage) Arena (erotic massage) V-club (erotic massage)

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19	KT (participant and the manager of one FB group)	41	Single	10+	DJ Station FAKE G.O.D. Telephone (gay bar) Chakran Mania R3 Underground 39 (sauna) Babylon (sauna) Dream Boy TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) HERO Prince (erotic massage) Arena (erotic massage) V-club (erotic massage) Banana (erotic massage)
20	Citrus	41	Single	10+	DJ Station G.O.D. Telephone (gay bar) G-Star (gay bar) Chakran Mania R3 Underground 39 (sauna) Babylon (sauna) Heaven Dream Boy TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) HERO Prince (erotic massage) V-club (erotic massage) Banana (erotic massage)

## Appendix 2 Table of participant (during ethnography)

	Name	Age	Relationship status	Times of visiting Bangkok	Travel with	Duration of the trip	Spaces visited during the fieldwork
1	Kyle	25	Single	1	alone	4	Hero DJ station Mania
2	KT	38	Single	10+	friends	8	DJ station

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							G.O.D. Babylon Mania
3	Rabbit	34	Single	6	alone	7	Chakran Mania DJ station R <sub>3</sub> FAKE
4	Pat	40	Single	8	alone	5	FAKE Chakran Mania DJ station
5	Marco	40	Partnered	3	alone	5	Chakran
6	Wei	35	Single	1	alone	7	Mania DJ station Prince Jupiter
7	Gas	30	Single	10+	friends	4	Mania DJ station
8	Yu	33	Single	1	friends	6	Mania DJ station Jupiter
9	A-Wan	26	Single	1	friends	6	Mania DJ station Jupiter
10	Water	32	Single	4	friends	6	Mania DJ station Jupiter
11	Robin	35	Single	10+	friends	4	DJ station FAKE Mania R <sub>3</sub>
12	Wind	34	Partnered	10+	friends	4	DJ station FAKE
13	Ren	37	Single	4	friends	4	DJ station FAKE R <sub>3</sub>
14	Melon	34	Single	6	friends	4	DJ station FAKE R <sub>3</sub> V-Club
15	Albert	33	Single	5	alone	5	DJ station HERO
16	Ren	37	Single	3	alone	7	DJ station R <sub>3</sub> TAWAN (go-go bar)



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							Prince
17	Luke	37	Single	5	alone	5	R3 TAWAN (go-go bar) Prince
18	Hon	40	Partnered	9	boy-friend	7	TAWAN (go-go bar) Dream boy Xboy (go-go bar)
19	Master	42	Partnered	9	boy-friend	7	TAWAN (go-go bar) Dream boy Xboy (go-go bar)
20	Benny	43	Single	5	friends	5	Dream boy Xboy FAKE
21	Hao	33	Single	1	friends	5	Dream boy Xboy FAKE DJ Station
22	Du	33	Single	1	friends	5	Dream boy Xboy FAKE DJ Station
23	Roxy	39	Single	1	friends	5	Dream boy Xboy FAKE DJ Station
24	Alex	41	Partnered	10+	friends	11	DJ Station G.O.D. R3 FAKE
25	Chi	39	Single	10+	friends	11	DJ Station G.O.D. R3 FAKE Mania
26	Gun	37	Single	10+	friends	11	DJ Station G.O.D. R3 FAKE Mania
27	Bryan	35	Single	1	friends	11	DJ Station G.O.D. FAKE
28	Duncan	36	Single	10+	friends	7	DJ Station G.O.D.

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							FAKE Mania
29	Allen	40	Partnered	10+	alone	6	DJ Station G.O.D. FAKE Babylon Dream boy
30	Mei-Mei	34	Single	5	alone	4	DJ Station R3 Dream boy
31	Hunter	26	Partnered	1	alone	4	DJ Station R3 G.O.D.
32	Ming	34	Single	1	alone	5	HERO Arena Prince R3
33	Blue	31	Partnered	6	boy- friends	4	DJ station R3 Underground 39 Phahon Yothin Rama cinema (gay movie theatre)
34	Kenny	34	Partnered	4	boy- friends	4	DJ station R3 Underground 39 Phahon Yothin Rama cinema (gay movie theatre)
35	Orange	27	Partnered	1	boy- friends	4	DJ station R3 Underground 39 Phahon Yothin Rama cinema (gay movie theatre)
36	A-Fu	40	Single	10+	alone	30	Heaven
37	Shen	28	Single	1	alone	5	R3 DJ Station FAKE Prince
38	Mu	37	Single	6	alone	4	HERO DJ Station R3
39	Patek	41	Partnered	5	alone	6	DJ Station

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40	Egg	34	Partnered	2	boy-friend and friends	5	HERO DJ Station R3 FAKE Fresh boy (go-go bar)
41	Year	36	Partnered	2	boy-friends and friends	5	DJ Station FAKE Fresh boy (go-go bar)
42	Charlie	32	Single	1	friends	5	HERO DJ Station R3 FAKE
43	K	34	Single	1	friends	5	DJ Station FAKE Fresh boy (go-go bar) Banana (erotic massage)
44	Danny	27	Single	1	friends	5	DJ Station FAKE Fresh boy (go-go bar) Banana (erotic massage)
45	Tony	29	Single	4	friends	5	DJ Station FAKE Fresh boy (go-go bar)
46	Roro	28	Single	1	friends	5	DJ Station FAKE Fresh boy (go-go bar)
47	Liu	27	Single	1	friends	5	DJ Station FAKE Fresh boy (go-go bar)
48	Way	28	Partnered	1	friends	5	DJ Station FAKE Fresh boy (go-go bar)
49	Tao	30	Partnered	3	friends	5	DJ Station FAKE Fresh boy (go-go bar)

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50	Cary	31	Partnered	4	friends	5	DJ Station R3 FAKE Fresh boy (go-go bar) Banana (erotic massage)
51	Ivan	28	Single	5	alone	4	DJ station R3 Underground 39
53	Oliver	33	Single	4	alone	5	FAKE DJ Station
54	David	30	Partnered	2	friend	5	DJ Station HERO FAKE
55	Yi	38	Single	10+	friend	5	DJ Station Underground 39 Phahon Yothin Rama cinema (gay movie theatre)
56	Jade	31	Single	3	alone	4	HERO FAKE R3 DJ Station Dream boy
57	Aqua	40	Partnered	4	boy-friend and friends	5	TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) DJ Station R3 FAKE
58	Wood	28	Partnered	4	boy-friend and friends	5	TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) DJ Station R3 FAKE
59	Sea	36	Partnered	1	boy-friend and friends	5	TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) DJ Station FAKE
60	East	34	Partnered	1	boy-friend and friends	5	TAWAN (go-go bar) Jupiter (go-go bar) DJ Station FAKE

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61	B	30	Single	5	friend	6	DJ Station G.O.D. Babylon
62	Pony	37	Single	5	friend	6	DJ Station G.O.D. Babylon
63	Ray	26	Partnered	1	alone	5	DJ Station Dream boy
64	Frame	28	Partnered	3	boy- friend	4	DJ Station Dream boy FAKE R3
65	Hiro	34	Partnered	4	boy- friend	4	DJ Station Dream boy FAKE R3

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