

Negotiating Desire Through Profiles: A Multimodal Analysis of Taiwanese Gay Men's Self-Presentation on Grindr

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The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study explores how gay men in Taiwan strategically construct their gay identities and sexual desires through self-presentation on Grindr, which is a globally popular dating app. Drawing on a multimodal content analysis of 11 gay users' profiles, the research investigates both visual and textual strategies, including photo choices, role labels, and coded language to imply sex preferences. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, this study identifies key patterns in how users negotiate visibility, masculinity, and sexual positioning within Taiwan's evolving queer landscape. Despite the country's progressive stance on same-sex marriage, findings reveal that ongoing tensions between public visibility and personal privacy, as evidenced by the selective concealment of faces and reliance on community-specific slang. The analysis demonstrates how the observed gay users mobilize both dominant and submissive tropes through images and coded language, enacting gender/sexuality roles in line with Butler's theory of performativity. The findings also underscore the importance of subcultural literacy for the purpose of decoding profile content, because many textual cues and emojis function as in-group signals intelligible only to culturally embedded users within gay communities. This study contributes to queer digital media research by foregrounding Taiwanese-specific communication practices in global gay app cultures and emphasizes the need for further multimodal inquiry into LGBTQ+ digital self-representation in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: Grindr, dating app, gay users, Taiwan, gay codes

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Introduction

Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage in 2019 (Friedman & Chen, 2023). This milestone has been followed by a gradual increase in social acceptance of gender diversity and emotional expression, significantly expanding the freedom of gay men to articulate their identities and desires in both public and digital spaces (Taiwan Equality Campaign, 2024). Within this context, gay dating apps have emerged as key platforms through which many gay men pursue emotional intimacy and sexual encounters (Steele et al., 2024).

To attract specific partners and increase visibility, users engage in strategic self-presentation through profile photo selection (Jaspal, 2017), gender role labeling (Birnholtz et al., 2014), and linguistic choices (Cardoso et al., 2019). These forms of presentation are not merely reflections of individual preference but are deeply embedded in broader norms around gender roles, expressions of desire, and the “insider discourse” of gay culture (Qiu, 2012). Thus, the images and language used in these digital profiles often serve functions of attraction, filtering, and identity performance.

However, existing research on Taiwanese gay dating app use has primarily relied on interview-based qualitative methods (Hou, 2020; Wu, 2023), with limited empirical attention to the actual profile content created by users. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the visual and textual strategies employed by Taiwanese gay men on one dating app, that is, Grindr. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how gender and desire are enacted and reproduced in digital queer spaces.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ: How do gay men in Taiwan present themselves on Grindr through images and language?

To breakdown the above umbrella question, the following specific narrow-down inquiries are targeted:

RQ1. What kinds of images (e.g., face, body, fashion style) are frequently used by gay male users in Taiwan?

RQ2. What kinds of language (e.g., role labels, emojis, coded expressions) are frequently used by gay male users in Taiwan?

Based on the answers to the above specific questions, the following one is also proposed to discuss the cultural implications of the visual and textual patterns identified in the self-profile construction by gay users of Grindr:

RQ3. How do these visual and linguistic elements reflect gendered expectations and the sexual culture of the gay community?

Literature Review

This study examines how gay men present themselves on gay dating apps, with particular attention to how visual and linguistic strategies are used to construct gender roles and express desire. This section reviews four key studies that inform this investigation, highlighting their contributions and limitations in relation to the Taiwanese context.

To address the research gap, this study poses the following guiding questions: How do gay men in Taiwan present themselves on Grindr through images and language? What social or cultural

meanings do these strategies reflect? The following review of studies shed some light on these aspects of inquiries.

Self-Presentation and Identity Construction

Jaspal (2017) investigated identity construction among 18 Grindr users in the UK and found that users frequently employed both visual and linguistic strategies to shape their online personas. These included avoiding racial identifiers, blurring traditional gender roles, and selecting profile photos that obscure the face – strategies often motivated by concerns over slut shaming and privacy. Jaspal noted that users sought to maintain a boundary between their online and offline selves, enhancing a sense of control and self-efficacy through selective interaction. However, participants also expressed difficulty in sustaining a consistent identity across these contexts, reinforcing a tendency to compartmentalize self-representations.

Linguistic Strategies and the Representation of Gender Roles

Birnholtz et al. (2014) analyzed the linguistic patterns in user profiles and identified the word “looking” as the most frequently used term. It commonly signals users’ intentions, ranging from seeking emotional connection to casual sex. This term is often paired with euphemisms, such as “NSA” (no strings attached) or “fun”, allowing users to subtly communicate desires while avoiding direct sexual language.

Interestingly, when users employed the phrase “not looking for...”, they tended to use more explicit vocabulary, like, “hookups”. This contrast illustrates how users strategically shape first impressions and manage interactional boundaries. The word “friends” also appeared frequently; while seemingly platonic, it often served as coded language implying sexual interest. These linguistic choices reflect broader societal taboos surrounding open sexual expression, and the need to navigate respectability within a stigmatized communicative landscape.

The Interplay Between Images and Language

Cardoso et al. (2019) explored how Brazilian Grindr users used profile photos, captions, and emojis to express body ideals and sexual preferences. The study revealed a dominant hypermasculine aesthetic (marked by shirtless photos and assertive poses) that was closely linked to race, class, and cultural norms. Linguistically, users employed coded expressions such as “raw top” and emojis like 🌿 (a euphemism for drug use), creating a semiotic system intelligible only to those familiar with queer subcultural norms. The researchers argued that language in this context functions less as a fixed code and more as a flexible social practice. Understanding these signs relies on users’ sociolinguistic competence and cultural embeddedness, emphasizing the dating app as a symbolically rich and culturally gated space.

Platform Design and the Social Masking of Sexual Orientation

He (2021) conducted a content analysis and interviews with Chinese users of the gay dating app, Blued. The study found that Chinese gay users often avoided displaying identifiable facial images, largely due to fears of discrimination, privacy concerns, and platform surveillance. Although few users explicitly stated sexual intentions in their profiles, many privately acknowledged using the app for sexual encounters. Masculine language tended to accompany bodily or action-oriented descriptors, indicating that linguistic choices were intertwined with performative gender ideals. The study concluded that gay identity construction on dating apps

is not purely a matter of personal expression but is deeply shaped by platform affordances, cultural norms, and community expectations.

Summary and Research Gap

Collectively, these studies underscore how self-presentation on gay dating platforms is shaped by intersecting forces: community norms, gender regulation, platform design, and the politics of desire. While they offer significant insights, most are situated in Western or mainland Chinese contexts. There remains a lack of empirical research on how Taiwanese gay men engage with dating platforms in ways shaped by local sociocultural frameworks and linguistic practices.

This study addresses the abovementioned gap by focusing on the profile content of Taiwanese gay men on Grindr. Specifically, it investigates how Taiwanese gay users employ visual and linguistic strategies as tools for self-presentation, and how these strategies reflect broader cultural meanings related to gender and desire within Taiwan's evolving queer landscape.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how gay men in Taiwan use images and language for self-presentation on a dating app Grindr. Instead of relying on interviews or surveys, the analysis in this study is based on publicly accessible user profiles, using qualitative content analysis to identify textual and visual themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that are recurring in the dataset.

The aim of the analysis is to understand how the textual and visual self-presentation strategies reflect users' sexuality identity, expressions of desire, and engagement with cultural and community norms. The dual focus on both visual and textual elements offers a more holistic understanding of identity construction in queer digital spaces.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

In terms of sampling, data were collected through purposive sampling; that is, the authors deliberately selected 11 public Grindr profiles to represent diverse patterns of visual and textual self-presentation among gay men in Taiwan. These profiles shared the following inclusion criteria: (1) each profile contained at least one photo (either of the user's face or body); (2) the profile included written self-descriptions or role labels (e.g., top, bottom, vers); and (3) the users were located within regions of Taiwan, as identified on Grindr.

To protect user privacy and address ethical concerns in the analysis, the study removed or obscured any identifiable information that could disclose personal identity or provoke sensitivity regarding sexuality. This includes users' faces, explicit exposure of sexual organs, and usernames. Although Grindr profiles are publicly accessible, the study took ethical precautions to ensure anonymity and respectful representation.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed a qualitative content analysis framework, drawing on the principles of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process can be divided into the following stages:

- Familiarization: All profile texts and images were reviewed multiple times to identify initial patterns and communicative strategies.
- Coding: Key elements were manually coded, including visual markers (e.g., shirtless photos, covered faces), role labels (e.g., top, bottom), and textual cues (e.g., emojis, slang, coded phrases).
- Theme Development: Codes were grouped into broader themes that reflect how gay users present masculinity, express desire, and negotiate community-specific or gay-cultural norms.
- Interpretation: Each theme was analyzed in relation to the research questions and existing scholarship on gay digital culture, gender performance, and semiotic self-presentation.

Findings

Overview of the Findings

This section presents the findings from the analysis of 11 publicly accessible Grindr profiles as produced by the gay male users located in Taiwan. The analysis focused on four key aspects, namely, photo types, age ranges, disclosure levels of sexual roles, and linguistic strategies employed for self-description. These elements were reviewed to understand how gay users construct their self-presentation and negotiate visibility, identity, and sexual desire on a gay dating app.

Table 1 shows the coding manual for this study. Each profile was coded in terms of four features: age range, presence of facial photos, presence of body photos, and disclosure of sexual roles. Each sampled profile was levelled in terms of D1~D11. The age range could be identified in the profile section, as required to be revealed by the dating app.

Table 1

The Overview of the Coded Data

Data	Age	Facial Photos	Body Photos	Sexual Role
D1	30~40	✓	✓	Vers Top
D2	40~50	×	×	Top
D3	30~40	×	✓	Side
D4	20~30	✓	✓	×
D5	30~40	×	✓	Top
D6	30~40	×	✓	×
D7	30~40	×	✓	Bottom
D8	30~40	×	✓	Top
D9	20~30	✓	×	Top
D10	20~30	✓	✓	Bottom
D11	40~50	×	✓	Top

What follows presents the details of the textual and visual representative features in each of the 11 profiles. The textual and visual strategies employed by the gay users for self-presentation in the profile sections are discussed as follows.

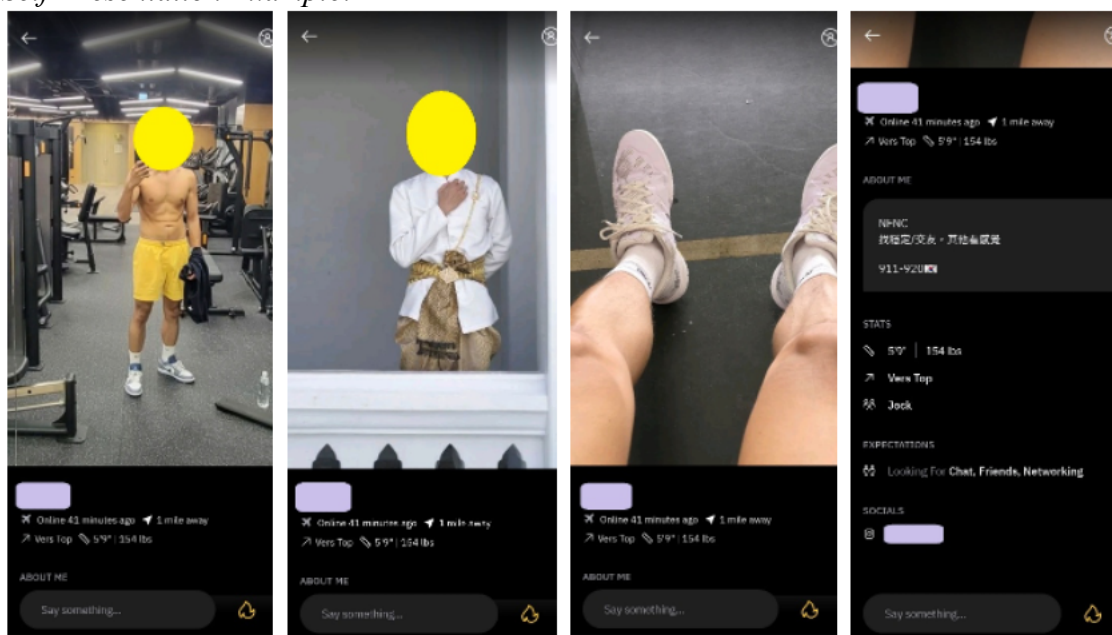
Analysis of the Sampled Profiles

This section presents a detailed analysis of each individual profile based on four dimensions: image type, age range, sexual role disclosure, and language strategy. Each example illustrates how users combine visual and linguistic elements to express identity, desire, and interactional intention.

Example D1 featured both a clear facial image and an upper-body photo showing muscular definition. The user disclosed a “Vers Top” role, indicating flexibility with a dominant preference. Coded terms such as “NFNC” (no photo no chat) were also used, suggesting a desire to control the dynamics of conversation. The combination of full-face exposure, dominant role, and coded language reflects a confident, assertive self-presentation.

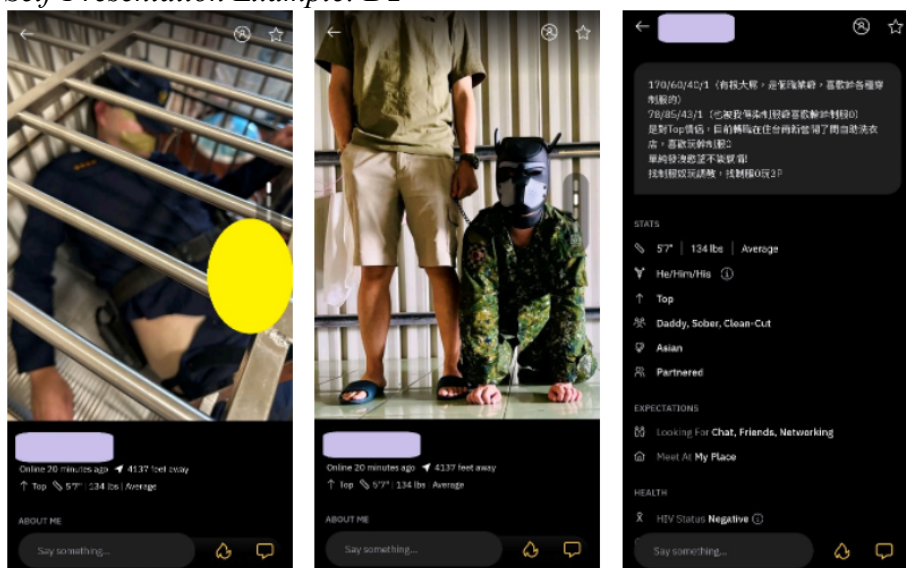
Figure 1

Self-Presentation Example: D1



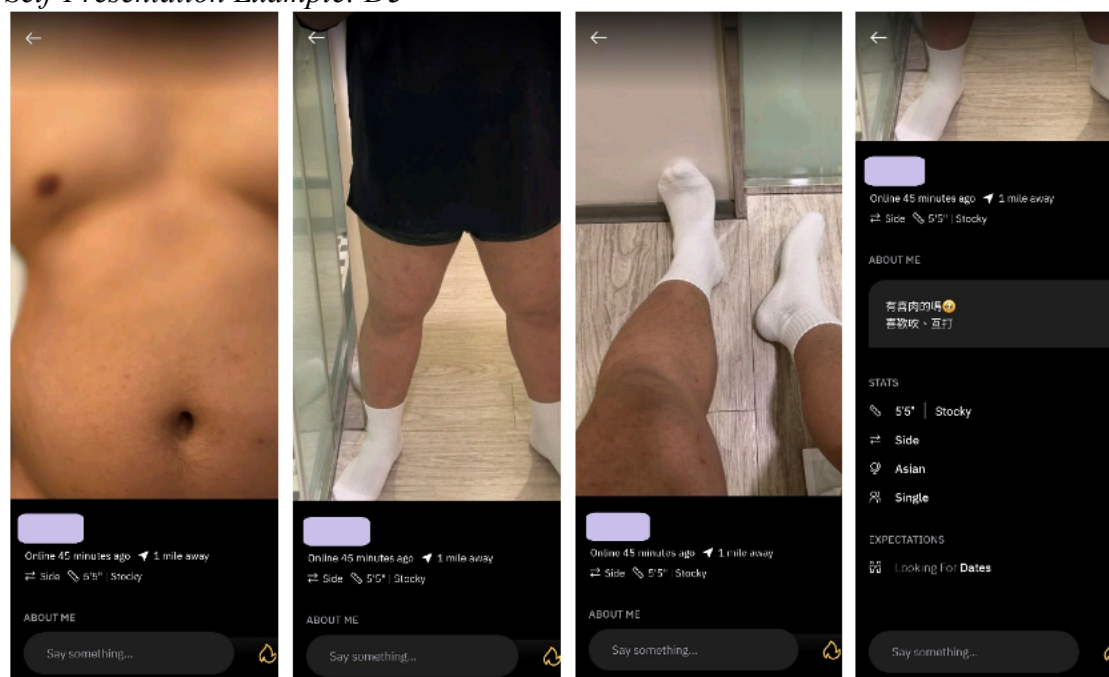
In example D2, neither the face nor the full body photo was shown. This showed that the users (two of them seem to share one account) strongly preferred anonymity or privacy. However, the goals as projected through the photos appeared to be sexual connections with clearly defined power asymmetry. In this profile, we can observe that one user constructs a rather masculine and dominant identity while the other one, portrayed as a dog, being submissive (which is further reinforced in the cage portrayal).

Figure 2
Self-Presentation Example: D2



In example D3, the user did not provide a facial photo, but instead uploaded a body photo that highlighted the torso. The user called himself “Side”, a less common gender identity term that refers to someone who likes non-penetrative sex. This character shows a more subtle or non-mainstream sexual identity. While his profile does not contain a detailed self-description, it uses some in-group terms, which are highlight sex-oriented, such as “Pig (肉)”, “Blowjob (吹)”, and “Jerk together (互打)”. We can observe that in this example, the gay user's visual emphasis on his body (not very attractive), and the use of unique gender roles (not interested in penetrative sex) portrayed himself rather non-traditional as a user of this dating app.

Figure 3
Self-Presentation Example: D3

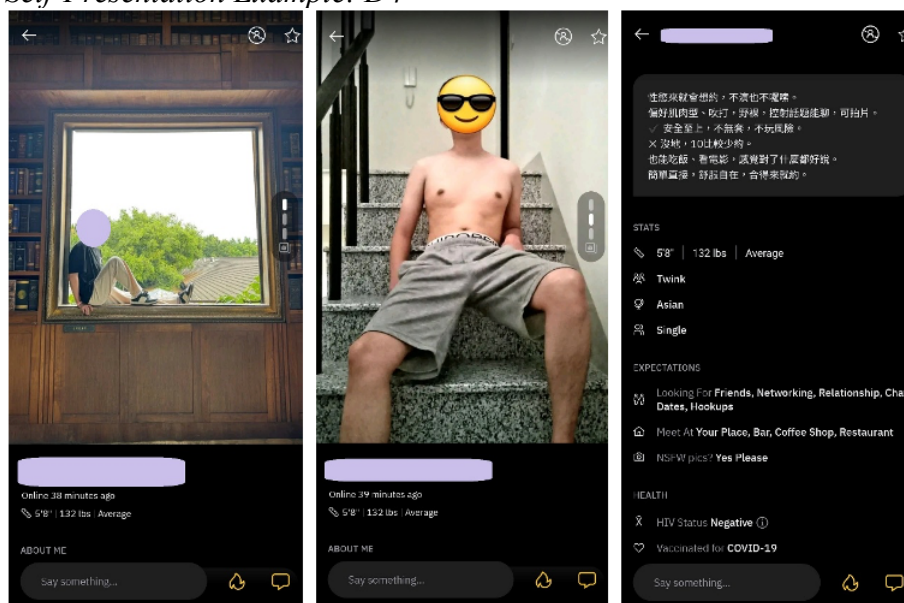


As shown in example D4, photos in which the face can be seen (being covered to protect the identity) and a full-body image was shown. Although the user did not state a sexual role, the presented body image was sexually suggestive. Also, some in-group language codes were referred to and with implications of sex desires. They are for instance “Do not have self-place (沒地),” “Exhibitionism (野裸)” and “Orgasm Control (控射)”. In the context of the gay community, the phrase “Do not have self-place (沒地)” typically indicates a lack of private space for sexual intercourse. In addition to explaining the actual conditions, this term also indirectly communicates to the other party the expectation that if they are interested in pursuing a relationship, they should provide a suitable location. “Exhibitionism (野裸)” refers to the preference for exposing one's body and engaging in sexual activities in outdoor spaces. This behavior is often associated with the pursuit of excitement and the challenge of traditional spatial norms and sexual performances. It reflects an individual's inclination towards open sexual practices and adventurous desires. In the context of the gay community, “Orgasm Control (控射)” primarily refers to sexual control behaviors characterized by power dynamics, where one party exerts control over the other party's ability to ejaculate.

This profile relied on a visually open strategy enhanced by coded language, allowing others to interpret the user's intent while avoiding role labeling. The emphasis appeared to be on attracting attention through visibility and sexual innuendo.

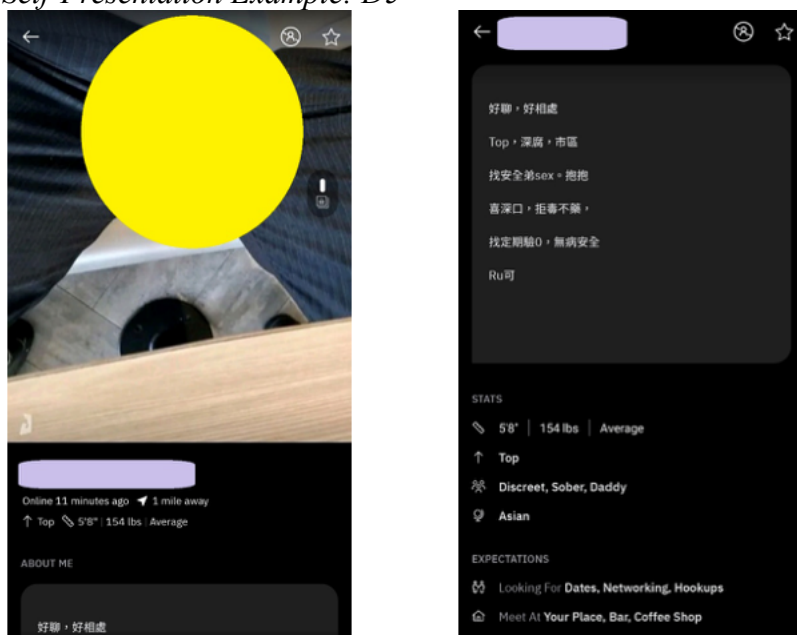
Figure 4

Self-Presentation Example: D4



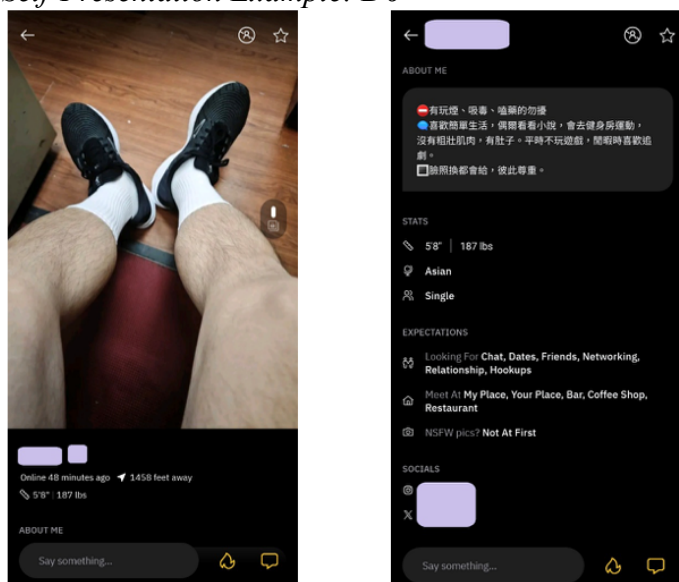
As shown in example D5, the profile contained no facial image but included a body photo focusing on the lower torso, with overt sexual implications. The user self-identified as “Top” and employed concise, suggestive language to indicate a preference for sexual interaction. The profile strategy centered on bodily display and targeted verbal cues, reinforcing a dominant and masculine presentation.

Figure 5
Self-Presentation Example: D5



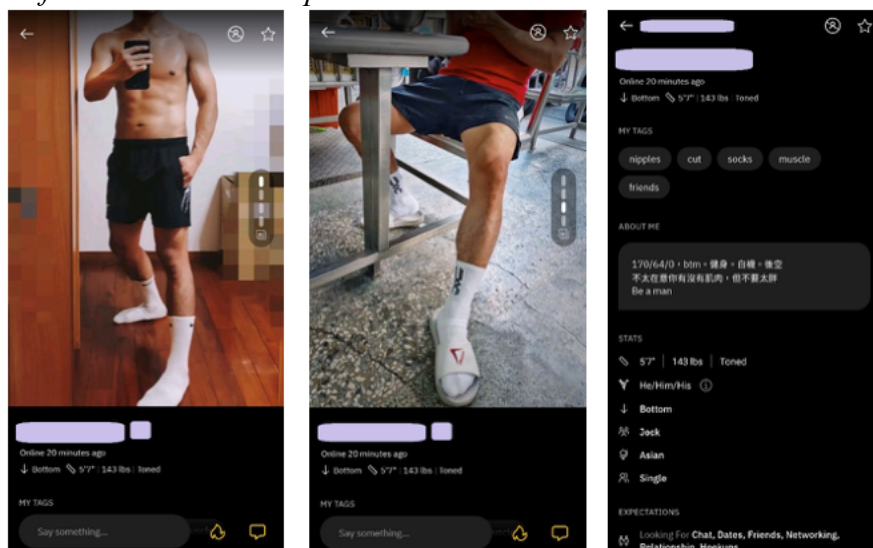
No face or body photo was present in example D6. Instead, the profile included a sneaker-wearing foot photo, possibly symbolizing masculinity or athleticism. The user did not disclose a sexual role, and the profile remained largely non-verbal, with limited textual filters. This minimalist strategy may reflect selective participation or a cautious approach, suggesting the user prefers to engage privately before revealing more.

Figure 6
Self-Presentation Example: D6



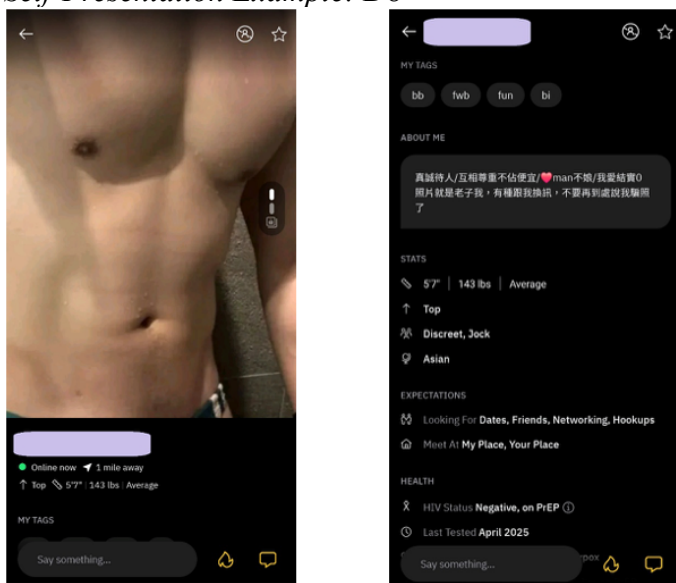
Example D7 omitted facial imagery but included muscular torso shots. The textual content identified the user as a “Bottom” and mentioned “exercise”. The presentation was visually suggestive but textually minimal. The profile reflected a traditional body-role pairing, using physical imagery and a clear role label to signal intent while preserving partial anonymity.

Figure 7
Self-Presentation Example: D7



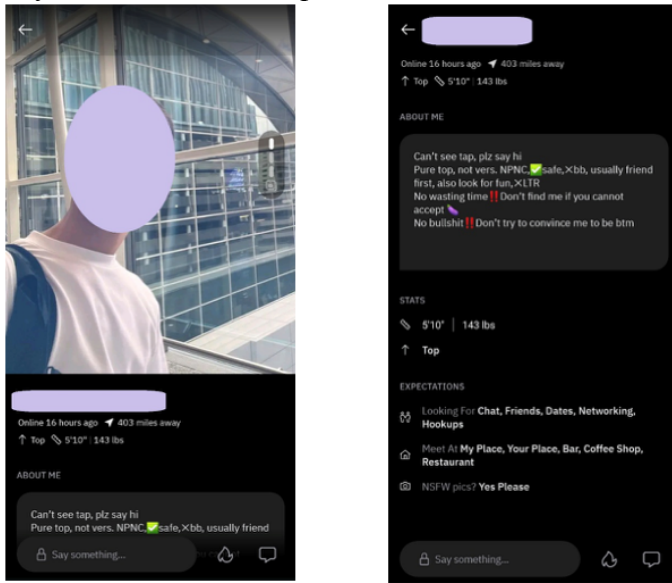
As shown in example D8, this user presented a full-body photo without a facial image. The photo emphasized muscularity and masculinity, and the user self-identified as “Top”. Language filters were used to express preferences (e.g., “likes masculine, not feminine [喜 Man 不娘]”, and “likes strong bottom [喜結實 0]”), alongside a narrative tone consistent with traditional masculine expressions such as “Lao Tzu (老子)” and “have guts (有膽)”. The overall presentation strategy reflected strong masculine performance through both image and language.

Figure 8
Self-Presentation Example: D8



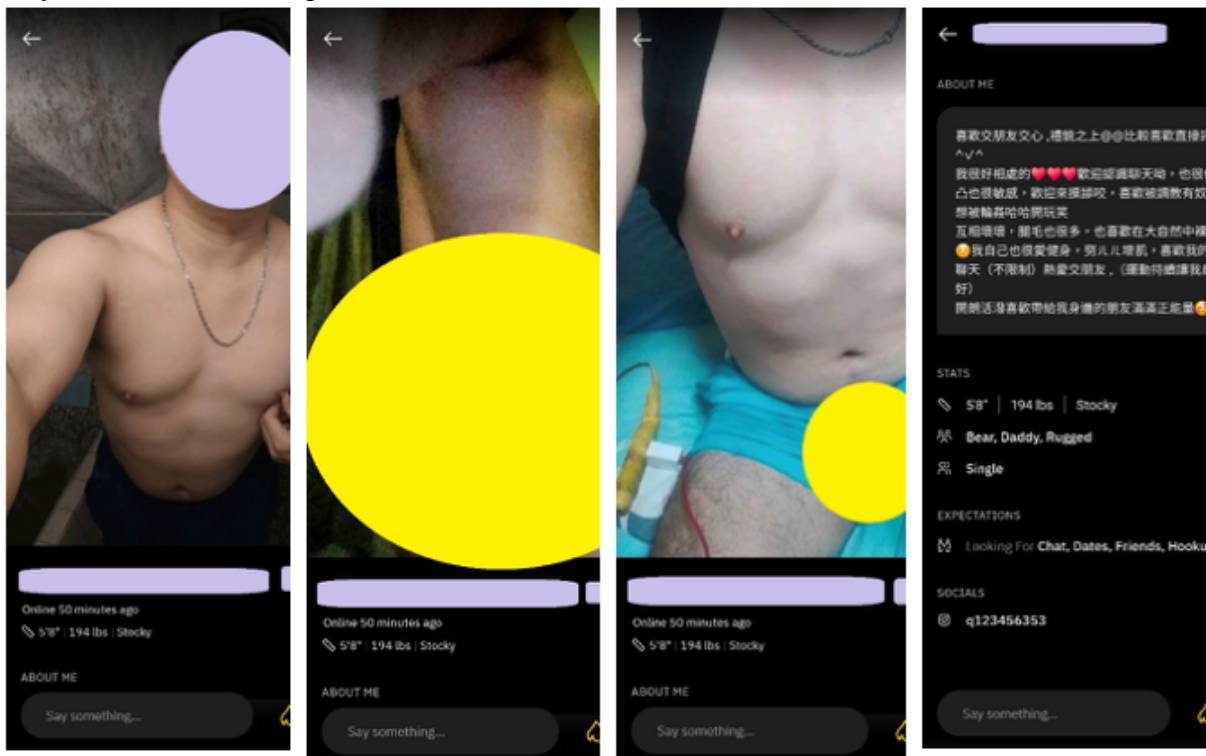
In example D9, this profile included a facial photo but no body image. The user, aged 20–30, displayed a casual, smiling face and described himself as a “Top”. Language choices included phrases like “NPNC”, “Pure Top”. and “Looking for Fun”, all of such preferences were expressed with emojis. This profile constructed an identity with sexual connection as the main goal. This shows that the user takes a confident and open approach to self-presentation, providing clues about relationships and sex without relying on obscure language.

Figure 9
Self-Presentation Example: D9



The age range of example D10 is between 20 and 30 years old, which is consistent with example D4 and example D9. All of them commonly chose to reveal their faces. In addition, the user of example D10 also posted a highly nude body photo and defined his sexual role as “submissive”. The chosen camera angle implied a power-dynamic framing, consistent with the sexual role described in the profile. This profile integrated visual exposure with submissive-coded language, clearly signaling an intent for sexual connection.

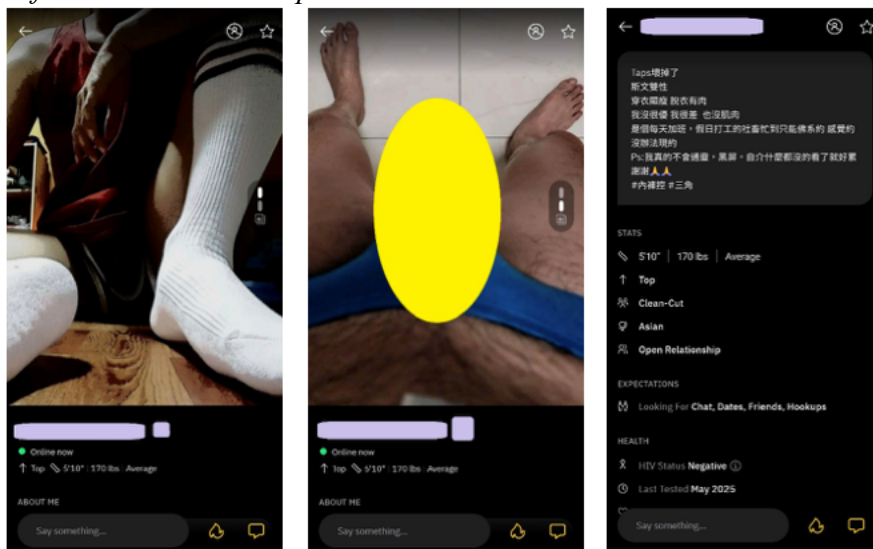
Figure 10
Self-Presentation Example: D10



In example D11, no face or full-body images were provided, but the user disclosed the role “Top” clearly. No emojis or overt sexual codes were used in the description, although phrases like “date” and “no date” appeared. A close-up underwear shot and a low-angle foot photo subtly communicated dominance and masculinity. This profile exemplified indirect but intentional visual strategies to convey a sexual objective without explicit language.

Figure 11

Self-Presentation Example: D11



Summary

Across these eleven profiles, users employed a variety of self-presentation strategies that combined or contrasted facial visibility, body imagery, sexual role disclosure, and coded language. Some profiles leaned heavily on visuals, while others prioritized text, especially when visuals were absent. A consistent theme was the negotiation between privacy and sexual signaling by means of muscular imagery, role identifiers, or subcultural codes. These examples illustrate the diverse ways Taiwanese gay men on Grindr construct sexual desire and sub-gay identity in a visually driven yet linguistically coded environment.

Discussion and Conclusion

Some interesting discussions are briefly presented in relation to the theoretical conceptualization of the identified self-presentational patterns as observed in the textual and visual design of Taiwanese gay users' profiles on Grindr.

First, the findings in this paper show that Taiwanese gay male users of Grindr perform their gay identity and show sexual desires through visual and linguistic cues, which is supported by Judith Butler's (Butler, 2025) notion of gender performativity. The strategic blending of masculine imagery and coded language reflects not only personal preference but a performative act shaped by digital and cultural expectations. Grindr becomes a stage where gender and sexual roles are constantly rehearsed and negotiated in gay communities.

Despite Taiwan's progressive legal landscape that endorses homosexuality and its own rights, the findings in this study still show that many gay users chose to conceal their faces or used indirect imagery. Such self-presentational preference indicates ongoing anxiety about queer

visibility. This privacy-performance duality in the process of pursuing sex or romance on dating apps suggests that acceptance of the homosexual remains partial, and self-presentation must balance openness with safety and discretion, especially in semi-public digital spaces established in Taiwan.

The findings also suggest that there is constant negotiation of power asymmetry and sexual position in the self-presentational decisions by gay men on Grindr. For example, in terms of some identified visual strategies (muscle display, faceless torsos) and textual filters (coded phrases, role labels), they seem to serve to manage how one's desire should be signaled properly and how it can be received through complicated decoding processes. In terms of portraying oneself as a powerful figure, some users would assert themselves with terms of dominance (“老子” implying “me”, as great as your daddy), while others chose to emphasize submissiveness through camera angles or minimal language. These choices reflect an ongoing negotiation of relational positioning.

Some textual jargons specific to the gay community were identified in this study and such findings show that understanding Grindr requires subcultural literacy. Phrases as evidence are like “NFNC”, “控射 (Orgasm control)”, or “沒地” (No private space). They are not universally legible but function as gatekeeping tools that foster in-group recognition. Users must signal knowledge to gain desirability and legitimacy within the app's community norms. Such obscure meanings can be decoded because one of the authors is an insider of the gay community, who is hence familiar with the decoded meanings.

Finally, as for future research suggestions, this study opens avenues for comparative research (e.g., Grindr in Taiwan vs. Japan or South Korea), longitudinal analysis (how profiles change over time), and expansion to include other queer identities. More multimodal approaches are also encouraged to approach textual and visual construction of digital identity of the under-researched Asian LGBTQ+ contexts.

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