This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

The Politics of Dating Apps

Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China

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CONCLUSION: EMERGENCE OF NETWORKED SEXUAL PUBLICS

In this book's introduction, I discuss two traditions of dating app research. One tradition considers the impacts of dating apps on influencing interpersonal processes such as relational development and self-presentation. The second tradition—which I follow in this book—is concerned with the political implications of this emerging technology. I believe that in order to appreciate and evaluate the role dating apps have in our lives, one must delve into the terrain of gender and queer politics, exposing the sociopolitical tensions and ripples experienced by dating app users. I am interested in analyzing the shared and contrasting experiences of female and male, straight and queer dating app users. To follow this path, I have proposed the concept of networked sexual publics as a theoretical lens for looking at the emerging dating app culture in China.

Early on, I provisionally defined the term *networked sexual publics* as both the assemblage of people united by their shared position in the patriarchal and heteronormative world connected by dating apps *and* the space offering a multiplicity of interpretations and relationships for the publics. Networked sexual publics consist not only of people whose objects of romantic and sexual desires are same-gender bodies. They also include people who reject the normative pattern of dating, marriage, and reproduction (Halberstam, 2005). The "publics" in networked sexual publics are therefore both phenomenological and imaginary (Hjorth &

Arnold, 2013). That is, on the one hand, phenomenological publics are forged through a wide range of networked interactions. They are forged by seeing each other on dating apps, chatting with each other, hanging out, hooking up, and developing friendships. On the other hand, its inescapably imaginary dimension emerges when people encounter challenges in using these apps because they are called to imagine the existence of people with similar gender and sexual identities who are facing the same difficulties. These challenges include, for straight women, sexual harassment and, for queer people, the fear of being outed. Networked sexual publics thus consist of people who share the same position in the patriarchal and heteronormative world coming together through dating apps.

In this book, I have directed my attention to how my informants assigned meanings to the apps they used. In the introductory chapter, I point out that dating apps such as Momo and Blued have often been viewed too simplistically as merely hookup apps. My in-depth interviews revealed more diverse sets of interpretations. I found that dating apps are not only a laboratory for sexual experiments: they are a springboard to romance and marriage, a third place between home and the workplace, a gateway to new worlds, a gallery of good-looking people, and a portal to look for business partners. Especially for queer app users, they are a potent symbol of social legitimacy and a platform for finding emotional support and information from their community. These multiform interpretations, in turn, result in various relationships—long-term romantic relationships, short-term open relationships, community-based engagement, or merely the act of gazing at people. Networked sexual publics support multiple interpretations and diverse relationships.

The concept of networked sexual publics is meant to shift our attention from technological artifacts to the political and social implications surrounding their use. Although my research was conducted in southern China, it provides insights into this global emerging culture of dating apps. In this concluding chapter, I address this question: how can we study networked sexual publics in a global context? Based on the research presented in this book and my reflections on some of the latest developments on dating apps worldwide, I present five propositions on the defining features of networked sexual publics and ways to research this emerging phenomenon. These propositions return this concept to the currents of scholarship I relied on, charting courses for future intersectional, queer, and feminist scholarship on emerging communication technologies.

1 In networked sexual publics, when there is resistance, there is also dominance. We should note the various manifestations of resistance and dominance.

One of the three theoretical traditions where I situated my research is the body of literature that examines the relationships between gender and technology *and* between queerness and technology, respectively. While there have been recent attempts to reconcile feminist and queer concerns (Burgess, Cassidy, Duguay, & Light, 2016; Cipolla et al., 2017; Marinucci, 2010), existing scholarship on social media and dating apps has been founded on either the feminist critique of patriarchy (e.g., Wajcman, 2007; Wallis, 2013) or the queer critique of heteronormativity (e.g., Campbell, 2004; Cavalcante, 2019; Gross & Woods, 1999; Mowlabocus, 2010). I intend for my concept of networked sexual publics to be a unifying framework for the investigation of the rise of dating apps, foregrounding the common motif in the accounts of most of my informants—simultaneous resistance and dominance.

My informants often resisted patriarchy and heteronormativity in their everyday use of dating apps. In the context of the changing status of women, I explore the opportunities and challenges that dating apps such as Momo and Tantan afforded to straight women. They used dating apps to exercise their sexual agency and reverse-objectify the men they saw on dating apps. Queer men and women resisted compulsory heterosexuality in other ways. Queer men found using dating apps to be both enjoyable and even hopeful, though their experiences were also shaped by the fear evoked by contemporary Chinese queer politics. The affordance of communal connectivity in lesbian dating apps contributed to the making of queer women's *quanzi*, one that was comforting due to emotional support and information.

Yet the liberating potential of dating apps is not absolute. Michel Foucault (1979) reminds us that there is a "strictly relational character of power relationships" (p. 95). This relational character has two implications. First, both resistance and dominance are immanent in the same power dynamics. The site for resistance is inevitably used for the reassertion of dominance. Second, the characteristics of resistance that Foucault describes include a plurality of dominances. Dating apps, therefore, are where various manifestations of patriarchy and heteronormativity seep into interpersonal interactions.

Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) shows how digital media, through affordances of connectivity and visibility, have simultaneously enabled popular feminism and also popular misogyny. Responding to her prescient bidirectional conception of power, I illustrate how straight male dating app users reclaimed their dominance through the performance of gender and the objectification of women—the exact tactics women used to resist patriarchy on dating apps. Furthermore, app companies exercise dominance through app design. Rena Bivens and Anna Shah Hoque (2018) argue that Bumble, an app that positions itself as a feminist app through the "ladies ask first" feature, has reinforced cisgender logic by offering only two gender options and allowing its users to alter their gender only once. In a similar vein, I show that lesbian dating apps perpetuate heteronormativity by reasserting a rigid gender role distinction.

I do not believe that all male dating app users or their masculine practices are misogynistic. Nor do I imply that the companies that create dating apps such as Rela and Lesdo are conspirators in heteronormativity just due to their commercial nature. I think it is futile to look for, in the words of Foucault (1979), "the headquarters that presides over its rationality" (p. 95). The hegemonic aspect of networked sexual publics will never have a single convenient scapegoat. Instead, hegemony operates through the oppressive logics of patriarchy and heteronormativity that are constantly being reproduced. Therefore, to research networked sexual publics, our critique must go beyond technical features and consider larger social, cultural, and political systems. Scholars must recognize the inherent potential for both the resistance and dominance of networked sexual publics as they research how they manifest.

2 Networked sexual publics are about multiplicities of relationships. To reword Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's (1998) description of the queer world, networked sexual publics "include more relationships than can be mapped beyond a few reference points."[1]

I have reiterated that users of dating apps held a variety of interpretations of the apps they used. These multiform interpretations raise the point that dating apps are not just for dating. Instead, they are an infrastructure that supports multiplicities of relationships and nonrelationships—recalling some of my informants who only looked at photographs and had no intention of interacting with others. During my interviews, I noticed a term that my informants—straight and queer, male and female—often used: *mudixing* 目的性 (purposefulness). Unlike *mudi* 目的 (purpose), *mudixing* was used to refer to the singularity of any purpose. My informants used it in an entirely negative way to criticize some app users who revealed their motives too early and too bluntly. For instance, Kangqi described some men on Momo as too eager to have casual sex. "Those people's *mudixing* are too strong . . . rushing to develop casual sex relationships with you." Damon observed that on Blued, some users tried the app for a few days, disappeared, and then reappeared again. "These people have a strong *mudixing*—that is, looking for hookups. After they hook up, they need some time to 'cool down.'"[2] In other cases, my informants used *mudixing* to refer to people who used dating apps only to sell products. Bob told me that some users "have *mudixing*, not about casual sex but about—perhaps because of their jobs or being financial consultants—promoting their products and services." Dylan, who used Momo to look for business, referred to people as having *mudixing* when they were interested only in doing business on the app. The Chinese notion of *mudixing*, therefore, refers to a situation in which users reduce the multiplicity of relationships or nonrelationships afforded by dating apps into a singular goal.

A research implication of this observation is that although networked sexual publics are structured by individuals' shared position in the patriarchal and heteronormative world, they are not about sex or romance alone. Networked sexual publics must be approached as an excess, an overflow of relational possibilities afforded by dating apps. Even in the contexts of Western apps such Tinder and Grindr, which have a relatively simple interface, scholars must not assume that a unitary purpose exists among app users. They must consider how individual users interpret these apps and consider that relational goals may not be explicit or may change during the use of an app.

This aspect of networked sexual publics also suggests that any legal regulation that outlaws an entire class of behavior on dating apps deserves more critical attention. For instance, the Singaporean government recently made sending unwanted photographs of genitals illegal (A. Wong, 2019). This move will protect dating app users from sexual harassment, which induces distress and humiliation. What we must also consider, however, is the costs of these policies and laws. Regulations should both protect users and also preserve the organic, fluid, and sometimes flirtatious nature of networked sexual publics.

3 The meanings and affects that users attach to dating apps cannot be reduced to psychological motives. Intersectionality-like thinking is necessary. A dominant theoretical framework of recent dating app studies has been uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Originally developed to understand television viewing, uses and gratifications theory was an attempt among communication scholars to move from considering the "effects" that mass media has on people to looking at what people do with mass media. This theory assumes that audiences actively select media that satisfy specific cognitive needs. The effect of television violence, for example, cannot be assessed without knowing the audience's motives for watching television.

Using uses and gratifications, multiple research teams have identified the motives for using dating apps.[3] Unsurprisingly, all of these studies have pointed out that seeking sex is one of the common reasons for using a dating app. My central point here is that it would be an ontological error to treat sex-seeking across different groups of networked sexual publics as a homogeneous "use." Consider that, in Jed Brubaker, Mike Ananny, and Kate Crawford's (2016) sociotechnical account of gay men quitting Grindr, the same act carries various social meanings. Some gay men viewed leaving Grindr as a return to the old way of meeting new people. Others regarded it as a move to a new life stage that did not rely on seeking casual sex. Still more gay men said that leaving Grindr presented an opportunity to discuss relationship goals with their partners. Likewise, in this book, sex-seeking has very different meanings for different users. For my straight male informants, seeking sex partners fulfilled their physiological need to express their masculinity. For my straight female informants, the same practice was a tool for rejecting patriarchy and discovering their sexuality. For my queer female informants, it was a form of sociality that enabled them to look for someone with the same values and worldviews. Each of these motivations differed based on the users' identity, societal position, and other contextual factors.

Besides their cognitive aspect, networked sexual publics are also affective. Zizi Papacharissi (2014) discusses political participation in affective publics. I show that, depending on where the networked sexual publics are located in the heteronormative world, using dating apps triggers and reinforces different emotions. By turning our attention to the meanings and affects people hold toward dating app use, I have been able to peel back the multiple layers of personal and political endeavors that a single behavioral motive label fails to distinguish.

Looking to future research, one way to ensure that close attention is paid to the social meanings and affects among different groups is to adopt intersectional thinking. As I demonstrate in this book, analyzing one group of users (straight women, straight men, queer men, and queer women) at a time and contextualizing their experiences with dating apps based on their positionalities in contemporary gender and queer politics in China allowed me to discover their unique struggles, dilemmas, opportunities, and challenges. Cara Wallis (2013) puts it aptly when she writes, "in this way, we can . . . extract the fine nuances and diverse shades of meaning that technologies have for different groups, thereby creating a richer, 'thicker' understanding of technology, culture, and social change" (p. 188). Achieving this thickness, a characteristic of anthropological research, can enrich future research on emerging communication technologies.

As quite a lot of dating app research has relied on survey data and statistical analyses, I also wish to address the hazards of studying networked sexual publics quantitatively. Very often, scholars, including myself, have regressed the motives for using dating apps on gender, sexual orientation, and the interaction of the two. They then removed the interaction term from the regression model if it was not statistically significant. This way of incorporating intersectionality-like thinking into research is what Ange-Marie Hancock (2016) calls the "intersectionality-as-testable explanation" approach, which she warns misrepresents intersectionality theory. Intersectionality theory offers a research paradigm that conceives of the social world and human practices as structured by multiple axes of domination. That is, intersectionality is an *a priori* assumption about the phenomena that we are researching. Accordingly, it is essential to assume "combinations of conditions as the default analytical starting point" (Ragin & Fiss, 2017, p. 11).[4] My approach taken in this book—assuming that the preconceived axes of power of patriarchy and heteronormativity have already put my informants into different sets of struggles—let me explore inductively their intersectional experiences.

4 Networked sexual publics are regionally specific. We should relate the emergence of networked sexual publics to the historical, social, and cultural environments of the region.

This study was inspired by scholarship in mobile cultures of the Asia Pacific, whereas most studies of dating apps have been conducted in Western countries. This book provides an alternative perspective by examining the dating app culture in urban China, extending scholarship on Asian mobile cultures (Berry et al., 2003; Cabañes & Uy-Tioco, 2020). The central concern of this scholarship is how to conceptualize a global phenomenon in a local context. The emergence of "Asia as method" in science and technology studies also suggests that a phenomenon in Asia should not be used as a case to "test" Western theories. Instead, it should be regarded as a constitutive element of that very phenomenon (Anderson, 2012). The fact that Western dating apps were not popular in China provided a window into the local specificities of both the apps and their users. This book has enriched our understanding of the role dating apps play in shaping gender and queer dynamics in the Chinese context through engaging with indigenous concepts and specific sociopolitical circumstances that are inescapably local. In particular, discussions in chapter 2 and 3 contribute to technofeminist scholarship where gender relations and technology use are mutually constitutive (Wajcman, 1991, 2006, 2007), and by tracing the social history of women in China and employing the indigenous concept of *wen-wu* 文武 (literary-military) masculinities, they also reveal the cultural specificity of dating apps' interpretations. For example, women's interpretation of dating apps as a springboard for marriage was intensified by the threat of being stigmatized as *shengnü* 剩女 (leftover women), a politicized and gendered pejorative. Meanwhile, men's interpretation of the very same set of apps as a platform of business was reflective of the changing idealization of *wen* masculinity in neoliberalized China.

Chapters 4 and 5, acting as a pair, bring our attention to the affect, affordances, and experiences of digital technology among queer people in a specific regional context (Campbell, 2004; Cassidy, 2018; Cavalcante, 2019; Landström, 2007; Molldrem & Thakor, 2017; Mowlabocus, 2010). I demonstrate that stagnant Chinese queer politics have limited the affective experience of using dating apps and have shown that the rhetoric of pride so ingrained in the Western LGBTQ movement does not apply to Chinese queer politics. The double predicament experienced by Chinese queer women rendered their apps a platform predominantly for community-building.

Therefore, future scholars who want to understand the networked sexual publics in another region must first be familiar with local culture and society. For instance, Jason Vincent Cabañes and Christianne Collantes's (2020) work on Filipino female dating app users living in Manila invokes the concept of "digital flyovers" to describe the way dating apps have allowed these women to reach out to foreigners, bypassing local Filipino men whom they deem uncosmopolitan. They conclude that women's desire for foreigners must be understood against the fraught colonial history of the Philippines.

Knowing the local language, in additional to culture, can further offer an edge in one's scholarly analysis. For example, Larissa Hjorth (2003) uses the Japanese concept *ma* 間 to examine mobile phone culture in Tokyo. The word *ma* means a pause in time or space. It is used in phrases such as *mamonaku* 間も無く, which literally means "pause no more" or, conceptually, "shortly." She appropriates the term to refer a conceptual ambiguity that suggests both presence and absence simultaneously. On public transport in Japan, it is considered rude to talk on one's phone or speak aloud. Therefore, most communications are conducted through texting. *Ma* captures a space where no communication and full communication happen at the same time. This example illustrates that culturally accurate and localized readings are most palpable when indigenous concepts serve as a theoretical lens to unpack local phenomena. What kinds of indigenous terms do people from different regions use to refer to dating apps? What are the connotations of those terms? What cultural repertoires do the terms draw from when people use them to name dating apps?

5 There is a limit to networked sexual publics. Not every individual has access to networked sexual publics, and for those who do, there is a price to being connected.

Networked sexual publics have opened up new possibilities for socializing, relationship-seeking, sexual experimentation, and business practices. This is a departure from the restrictive modes of intimacy and connectivity that were available to earlier generations of Chinese. However, networked sexual publics are predicated on the availability of communication technologies and network services. For this reason, they are not equally accessible to all. The "information haves" enjoy seamless connections to networked sexual publics using the latest smartphones and unlimited mobile data plans. The "information have-less"—connected by low-end or used smartphones and public free Wi-Fi—enjoy only intermittent access to networked sexual publics (see J. L. Qiu, 2009). The "information have-nots," unfortunately, resort to other, premediated forms of affective infrastructure. For instance, mobility may be hampered if a person can use only the free public Wi-Fi that is available only at certain locations and certain times. Such an economic and informational hierarchy reminds us that, although the features of a dating app may remain identical across the globe, its affordances may not be so homogeneous.

Apart from accessibility, one often has to pay to access networked sexual publics. Dating apps are a capitalist product. To sustain their operation, dating app companies generate revenue from their users. Some apps offer premium services to those who pay a monthly fee. For instance, on the gay dating app Aloha, users with premium subscriptions can search for people based on location. Monthly subscriptions are often renewed through auto pay, providing the app companies with a stable income stream. These relationships of data and money can endure, surprising even the users who signed up for the service. One of my straight female informants, Fanny, told me that she had forgotten she had subscribed to Momo through auto payments until she noticed that money was being withdrawn from her Alipay account.[5] Other apps, like Momo and Blued, rely heavily on live streaming as an income source (Deng, 2018; Edmunds, 2017). Viewers purchase digital gifts through the apps and send them to their favorite live streamers. In the process, the apps take a share of the gifts' monetary value. Only three of my sixty-nine informants reported buying and giving digital gifts, and they spent from CNY100 (~USD15) to CNY1,000 (~USD145). Dada shared her experience. "I really wanted to listen to her [her favorite live streamer] sharing, know her stories. She invited us to give her gifts, so I did!" In recounting their experiences of buying digital gifts, my informants focused solely on their appreciation of the live streamers, without paying attention to how their gifts had contributed to the app companies' business.

Those who do not pay the app companies in money provide their data in exchange for the "free" services. Dating services companies are data companies. Kath Albury, Jean Burgess, Ben Light, Kane Race, and Rowan Wilken (2017) describe the ways personal data are produced, stored, and capitalized in what they call the "data cultures" of dating and hookup apps. Individuals are often unaware of how much data a single app has collected from them (Duportail, 2017). The potential for aggregating data to make even greater profits is massive for groups like Match Group, which owns dozens of dating services, including Match.com, OkCupid, Tinder, and Plenty of Fish.

These capitalist data cultures also align uncomfortably with China's policies on surveillance: "For their part, digital companies are rarely willing to discuss the details of law enforcement and intelligence agencies' access to their customer databases, or the degree to which they assist or resist such access" (Albury et al., 2017, p. 8). This is why the American government is worried that Grindr, which is still owned by a Chinese company at the time of writing, would surrender its users' data to the Chinese government (Sanger, 2019). Among my informants, however, only a few had ever thought about data privacy. Most did not know that the apps they were using could sell their data to third-party advertisers or give them to the government. Some did not even think their data were valuable. Others did not think they could escape from the data cultures and surveillance, given that their lives were based so much on the Chinese internet and the dozens of apps on their phone. For these reasons, scholars must consider the cost of being networked and understand that due to their position in the economic and informational hierarchy, not everyone has equal access to networked sexual publics. Although issues of access and surveillance are not apparently addressed by the theoretical foundations that I relied on, these are crucial areas for further research.

* * *

In this book, I have provided a substantial discussion of the experiences of men and women in China with different sexual orientations. By doing so, I have painted a more comprehensive picture of the gender and queer politics of dating apps in China than has been available to date. My concept of networked sexual publics not only captures the defining characteristic of the Chinese dating app culture, but it also provides guidelines for future research. Networked sexual publics involve resistance and dominance; they are about multiple users having multiple interpretations pursuing multiple relationships; they have a strong regional specificity that requires in-depth knowledge of the culture and society of the region; and they involve costs that restrict access.

To return to the story of Nancy: At the time of writing this conclusion, I contacted her again via WeChat to see if she had tried the lesbian dating apps I had recommended to her earlier. I wanted her answer to be, “Yes, I did. I am going on dates with a girl from my hometown!” I wondered how persuasive this book would be if I had demonstrated the disruptive potential of dating apps in today’s Chinese patriarchal and heteronormative society. Her experiences would then demonstrate how networked sexual publics could open space for people to reach outside of heteronormative society. Her answer, however, was not what I had hoped for. She replied, “I think I still, comparatively speaking, prefer men.” I was disappointed for a second, but then I started to think: wasn’t the fact that Nancy could have had a fleeting thought to question her sexual orientation and that we could openly discuss this issue already indicative of the tensions and ripples created in the old system by this emerging new communication technology? If networked sexual publics are anything, they are about potential—the potential to discover oneself, to bring forth a more gender-equal and queer-friendly world, and to imagine a new form of intimacy and sociality.