

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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# APPENDIX: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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In this methodological reflection, I provide details of my field trips and elaborate on the methodological and ethical challenges I encountered in the process of recruiting informants and interviewing.

## FIELD TRIPS

I conducted two separate field trips to Guangzhou to collect data for this book. The first field trip took place from August to December 2016. All my interviews with straight dating app users were conducted in this field trip. The second field trip, focusing on queer dating app users, was conducted from July to September 2018.

## CHALLENGES IN RECRUITMENT

Recruiting informants for this study was not an easy task. Thinking that there was no better way to contact dating app users than reaching out to them via the apps, during my first field trip, I first set up a “researcher’s profile” on two mainstream dating apps, Momo and Tantan. During my second field trip, I did the same on two popular gay dating apps, Blued and Aloha. I crafted the profile so that my academic identity and the

purpose of the research were foregrounded (see figure A.1). On Momo and Blued, which do not require mutual liking to start a conversation, I sent out one round of recruitment messages to people near me, containing the purpose of my research. The responses to my initial recruitment messages fell into three categories. Some users were interested in my research and signed up for it. Others stopped replying to me after learning more about the research. One particular user from Momo accused me of using “academic research” as a pretense for *yuepao* 约炮 (hooking up). I apologized and ceased to contact her. Still others, which were the majority, did not reply to my message at all. Considering that typical dating app users might not expect to be approached by researchers on the apps,



**Figure A.1**

This was my researcher’s profile on Tantan. Left: Following my name “Sam Chan” is a phrase indicating I was on the app for conducting my dissertation research. Right: I explain my intention to look for interview informants and list the criteria for participating. (Screenshot taken by the author on November 28, 2016)

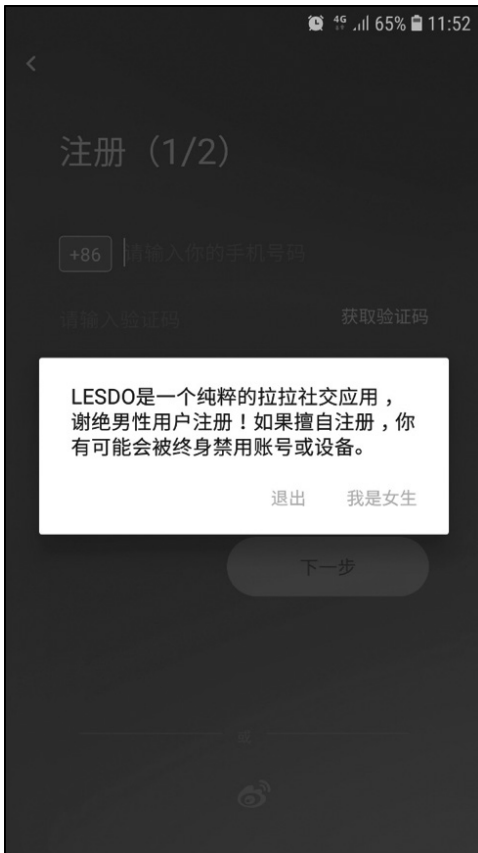
I did not want to cause too much disturbance for them, and I decided not to send any follow-up messages. At the same time, on Momo and Blued, I regularly posted via the “status updates” feature—which contained my research purpose—so that the users around me could become aware of my project without my having to send unsolicited messages to them. I waited for people to contact me. This passive method attracted only one person who volunteered to participate in my research.

I suspected the low participation rate from the methods above was due to the one-way push of the recruitment messages. Looking for research informants is similar to looking for a romantic partner on dating apps—both require mutual interest. Therefore, I switched my recruitment platform to Tantan and Aloha, which have the “swipe” feature. I basically liked every profile that appeared on my app and sent out a recruitment message to those who also liked my profile, presuming that those who liked my profile were interested in my research after reading it. Through these platforms, I successfully recruited around half of the straight female informants and some queer male informants.

Second, I attended a public lecture on women’s sexuality given by Dr. Pei Yuxin from Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, and I recruited participants from the audience. Dr. Pei is a sociologist of gender and sexuality studies. She was kind enough to introduce me to her audience and allow me to hand out leaflets on my research. In this way, I recruited another half of the straight women and some straight men.

Because Guangzhou has an active LGBTQ support network, my third channel for recruitment was through LGBTQ organizations. I contacted the person in charge at Tongcheng 同城 (the Gay and Lesbian Campus Association in China) and Qinyouhui 亲友会 (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays of China), respectively. They helped send out recruitment messages to their members and volunteers. I recruited half of my queer male informants and most of my queer female informants in this way. I did not register the accounts on any lesbian apps because these apps explicitly prohibit men from joining them (see figure A.2).

Finally, many informants, after our interviews, were willing to invite their friends to participate in the study. These informants sent out invitations, which I drafted, to their friends. I waited for responses. Most of my



**Figure A.2**

Lesdo, a dating app tailored for queer women, explicitly states that the app is only for *lala* 拉拉 (lesbians) and does not welcome any male users. (Screenshot taken by the author on July 18, 2018)

straight male informants were recruited in this way. To protect the informants' identities, I did not cross-check who had referred whom.

In total, I interviewed sixty-nine dating app users. While there is no a one-size-fits-all rule for the number of informants needed in a qualitative study, researchers have pointed out that the number depends on factors such as the homogeneity of the group (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) and saturation of knowledge (Bertaux, 1981). Within each group, my informants were relatively homogeneous: all of them identified as

ethically Chinese, except one informant, Anthony, was three-quarters Chinese and one-quarter Indian but had lived his life completely as a Chinese; they were living in the same region; and most of them were born in the 1980s and 1990s. Further, I was able to recognize some patterns in my informants' narratives and experiences after conducting a dozen of interviews within each group. My time in city also allowed me to conduct additional interviews to ensure knowledge saturation.

Concerning the recruitment and sampling processes, I have two things to note. First, my experience of recruiting people for my research demonstrated that trust and rapport are crucial. On Momo and Blued, sending unsolicited messages to strangers who had no prior relationship with me barely helped me get them on board. However, people responded fairly positively when they were referred by either friends or organizations that they trusted or when they were interested in my research after reading my profile on Tantan and Aloha. Second, qualitative research like mine that is based on convenience or snowball sampling does not look for observations that can be generalized to the entire dating app user population. Instead, my informants' experiences with dating apps offered me insight so I could theorize the gender and sexual dynamics in the digital context.

## **ETHICS IN INTERVIEWS**

As I point out in the main text, interviewing is a social process. Understanding that the interviews could involve personal and socially sensitive issues, the informants also determined the venues where they wanted to meet. Most people picked a public yet quiet coffee shop or restaurant. Some decided to use their offices.

Interviewing also involves a power relationship between the researcher and the informant. How to present myself became the first major concern in conducting the interviews. I selectively highlighted different aspects of my identity to make my informants feel more comfortable sharing their views and experiences related to sex and love online. Michael Schwalbe and Michelle Wolkomir (2003) remind us that, to a male informant, "an interview situation is both an opportunity for signifying masculinity

and a peculiar type of encounter in which masculinity is threatened” (p. 57). They argue that the nature of academic interviewing—requiring the informants to follow the lead from the researcher, to self-disclose, and to reflect on their own past behavior—often puts men in an uncomfortable position. So to men, I often said, “Since I don’t know how people behave in China, because people in Hong Kong or the United States are different, why don’t you tell me. . . .” By foregrounding my foreignness, I let my informants play the role of “experts,” giving them some control over the conversation.

Shulamit Reinharz and Susan Chase (2003) are concerned with the power relationship between a male researcher and a female informant, especially when gendered experiences were the subject. Likewise, Travis Kong, Dan Mahoney, and Ken Plummer (2003) raise a similar concern regarding straight researchers and LGBTQ informants. Some feminists have suggested that researchers self-disclose to reduce the distance between themselves and their informants. I followed this practice by sharing my experiences on dating apps with my informants. Whenever it felt appropriate, I foregrounded my sexual orientation to my straight female informants and my queer informants. Although Hongwei Bao (2018) describes Guangzhou as “one of the most queer-friendly cities in China” (p. 15), given that being gay is still not totally accepted by the majority of Chinese (Bao, 2018; Kong, 2011; Zheng, 2015), I was not comfortable disclosing my sexual orientation to my straight male informants. I was afraid that this would turn them away or damage my authority. To them, I focused on myself as a man. Whenever these male informants asked about my hookup and romance history, I shared with them without explicitly mentioning the gender of my partners by using the word *keoi* 佢, which is a gender-neutral pronoun in Cantonese, or the word *ta*, which can be interpreted as either 他 (he) or 她 (she) in Putonghua.

The second concern I want to point out is the nature of my interviews. I would describe my interviews as ethnographic, aimed at revealing the emic views of dating app users. However, my research is not ethnography. Rooted in anthropology, ethnography requires researchers to immerse themselves in the everyday lives of their informants. Some anthropologists even advocate experiencing what their informants normally do,

including having sex with them if the research topic is related to sexuality (McLelland, 2002). Esther Newton's (1993) discussion of the erotic equation in ethnography reveals the presence of intimate relationships between researchers and their informants. I studied the experience of using dating apps, but I did not engage in in-app interactions with people I met on these apps beyond the recruitment stage. This was my deliberate choice because I believed that experiencing what my informants did, such as flirting on these apps, would jeopardize my professional identity and create inappropriate expectations on either side (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). Therefore, I was very careful to indicate to my straight female informants and queer male informants that our meeting would be completely professional, and I foregrounded my researcher's identity in both the online conversations and face-to-face encounters.

#### **DETAILS OF INFORMANTS**

Table A.1 provides details of the sixty-nine informants who generously shared their experiences with me.



**Table A.1** Details of the informants at the time of interview

Name	Age	App used <sup>a</sup>	Relationship status	Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants)	Education	Occupation	Monthly income <sup>b</sup>
<b>Straight women (interviewed in 2016)</b>							
Rosy	21	Tantan	Single, never married		Secondary school	Undergraduate student	Low
Chloe	23	Momo, Tantan	Dating		Bachelor's	Graduate student	Low
Brady	23	Tantan	Single, never married		Associate's	Interior designer	Midrange
Xiaolan	23	Tantan	Having a close emotional and sexual partner overseas but not defined as a boyfriend		Bachelor's	Graduate student	Low
Amanda	24	Momo, Tantan	Single, never married		Bachelor's	Graduate student	Low
Queenie	25	Tantan	Single, never married		Bachelor's	Studio assistant	Midrange
Nikki	26	Tantan	Dating		Secondary school	Salesperson	Midrange
Jessica	27	Momo	Single, never married		Bachelor's	Civil servant	High
Nancy	28	Tantan	Single, never married		Secondary school	Internet merchant	Midrange

Table A.1 Continued

Name	Age	App used <sup>a</sup>	Relationship status	Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants)	Education	Occupation	Monthly income <sup>b</sup>
Xiaoshan	29	Momo	Married		Secondary school	Masseur	High
Polly	29	Momo	Single, never married		Bachelor's	Translator	Midrange
Xiaojiao	30	Momo, Tantan	Single, never married		Bachelor's	Immigration consultant	Unstable
Fanny	31	Momo, Tantan	Single, never married		Bachelor's	Administrative assistant	Midrange
Katie	33	OkCupid, Tinder	Single, never married		Master's	Civil servant	Midrange
Kangqi	34	Tantan, OkCupid	Open relationship		Bachelor's	Writer	Unstable
Coco	34	Tantan	Married		Bachelor's	Garage owner	Midrange
Jennifer	37	Momo, Tantan	Single, divorced		Bachelor's	Administrative assistant	Midrange
Yiping	38	Momo	Married		Bachelor's	Doctor	High
Wenwei	<sup>c</sup>	Tantan	Single, divorced		Bachelor's	Financial consultant	<sup>c</sup>

*Continued*

**Table A.1** Continued

Name	Age	App used <sup>a</sup>	Relationship status	Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants)	Education	Occupation	Monthly income <sup>b</sup>
<b>Straight men (interviewed in 2016)</b>							
Xiaoli	19	Momo, Tantan	Single, never married		Secondary school	Undergraduate student	Low
Xiaolong	20	Momo	Single, never married		Associate's	Exhibition worker	Midrange
Roy	21	Momo, Tantan	Single, never married		Secondary school	Watchmaking apprentice	Low
Taibai	24	Momo	Dating		Bachelor's	Trade executive	Midrange
Nathan	25	Momo, Tantan	Single, never married		Master's	Marketing executive	High
Fred	25	Momo, Tantan	Dating		Associate's	Tourism officer	Midrange
Anthony	28	Momo, Tantan	Married		Secondary school	Theme park manager	High
Jiazhi	28	Tantan	Single, never married		Bachelor's	Office executive	Midrange
Clement	28	Momo, Tantan	Dating		Bachelor's	Bank officer	Midrange

**Table A.1** Continued

Name	Age	App used <sup>a</sup>	Relationship status	Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants)	Education	Occupation	Monthly income <sup>b</sup>
Dylan	29	Momo, Tantan	Single, never married		Associate's	Electronic developer	High
Victor	30	Momo	Dating		Bachelor's	Civil engineer	Midrange
Eric	31	Momo, Tantan	Married		Secondary school	Vehicle technician	Midrange
Alan	32	Momo	Dating		Master's	Civil servant	High
John	36	Tantan	Married		Doctorate	Lecturer	Midrange
Fung	36	Tantan	Single, divorced		Bachelor's	Café owner	Midrange
Bob	37	Momo	Single, divorced		Bachelor's	Property manager	Midrange
<b>Queer men (interviewed in 2018)</b>							
Chung	19	Aloha	Single	Male <i>tongzhi</i>	Secondary school	Undergraduate student	Low
Xiaomao	19	Blued, Aloha	Single	Gay	Secondary school	Undergraduate student	Low

*Continued*

Table A.1 Continued

Name	Age	App used <sup>a</sup>	Relationship status	Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants)	Education	Occupation	Monthly income <sup>b</sup>
Xiaoming	21	Blued, Aloha	Single	<i>Tongzhi</i>	Secondary school	Undergraduate student	Low
Ginger	22	Aloha	Having a “weekend lover”	Gay	Bachelor’s	Photographer	Low
Rice	23	Aloha	Single	Gay	Bachelor’s	Lawyer	Low
Gui	23	Blued, Aloha, Tantan	Having a regular sex partner	Queer	Bachelor’s	Unemployed	Low
Allen	24	Blued, Tantan	Single	Gay	Bachelor’s	Health and safety officer	Midrange
Tesla	24	Blued, Aloha	Single	Gay	Bachelor’s	Software engineer	Midrange
Green	24	Blued, Aloha	Single	Gay	Associate’s	Communication executive	Low
Ezra	24	Blued, Aloha, Fanbaizi, Tantan, Momo	Single	A man who desires another man	Bachelor’s	Civil engineer	Low
Damon	25	Aloha	Single	Gay	Bachelor’s	Market researcher	Midrange

Table A.1 Continued

Name	Age	App used <sup>a</sup>	Relationship status	Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants)	Education	Occupation	Monthly income <sup>b</sup>
Mali	25	Blued, Aloha	Single	Queer	Bachelor's	Graduate student and lawyer	Low
Norman	26	Blued, Aloha	Single	Homosexual/gay	Master's	Education consultant	Midrange
Yuan	26	Blued	Single	Gay/male homosexual	Bachelor's	Education consultant	High
Lasong	26	Blued	Dating	Male <i>tongzhi</i>	Bachelor's	Banking executive	Midrange
River	26	Blued	Single	Gay	Bachelor's	Laboratory technician	Midrange
Johnny	27	Blued, Aloha	Dating	<i>Tongzhi</i>	Bachelor's	Marketing executive	Midrange
Huajun	28	Blued, Fanbaizi	Dating	Gay	Bachelor's	Personal trainer	Midrange
Jerry	28	Blued, Tinder, OkCupid	Single	Queer	Bachelor's	Computer scientist	Low

Continued

Table A.1 Continued

Name	Age	App used <sup>a</sup>	Relationship status	Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants)	Education	Occupation	Monthly income <sup>b</sup>
<b>Queer women (interviewed in 2018)</b>							
Amy	18	Rela	Dating (with a man)	Bisexual	Secondary school	Telephone debt collector	Low
Alina	19	Rela, Soul	Single	Bisexual	Secondary school	Undergraduate student	Low
Magda	19	Rela	Single	Female homosexual	Secondary school	Undergraduate student	Low
Xiu	23	Rela	Single	Lesbian	Associate's	Unemployed	Low
Shawn	24	Rela, Lesdo	Dating	Queer	Bachelor's	Branding executive	Midrange
Xiaoyan	24	Rela	Single	Lesbian	Bachelor's	Real estate agent	Midrange
Charlie	24	Rela, Lesdo	Dating	Lesbian	Associate's	Social worker	Low
Xi	24	Rela, Lesdo, Lespark, Tantan	Single	Bisexual	Master's	Counselor	Midrange
Dada	25	Rela, Lespark	Dating	Bisexual	Secondary school	Real estate agent	Low

Table A.1 Continued

Name	Age	App used <sup>a</sup>	Relationship status	Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants)	Education	Occupation	Monthly income <sup>b</sup>
Alex	26	Lesdo	Dating	Queer	Bachelor's	Advertising copywriter	Low
Xiaoqing	26	Rela	Single	Female <i>tongzhi</i>	Bachelor's	Real estate investor	High
Shushu	26	Rela, Lesdo	Dating	Queer	Master's	Lecturer	Low
Jamie	26	Rela	Dating	Female <i>tongzhi</i> / lesbian	Bachelor's	Construction supervisor	Low
Becky	34	Lesdo, Lespark	Dating	Bisexual	Master's	IT maintenance technician	Low

Notes: a. These are the apps that my informants had been using three months prior to my interviews. b. Low: CNY5,000 (~USD725) or below; midrange: CNY5,001 to 10,000 (~USD725 to 1,450); high: CNY10,001 (~USD1,450) or above. c. Wenwei declined to disclose her age. My guess is that she was in her mid-forties. She also declined to disclose her monthly income.



