



Digital Resistance in a Patriarchal City: Lesbian Identity and Self-Representation on Dating Applications in Guangzhou, China

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Abstract

This paper explores how lesbian-identifying women in Guangzhou, a city shaped by persistent patriarchal norms and heteronormative expectations, use mobile dating applications—specifically The L, LesPark, and LesDo—as platforms for identity negotiation, resistance, and community-making. Drawing on in-depth interviews and digital ethnography with 15 local app users, the research investigates how these platforms serve not only as spaces for romantic connection but also as strategic tools for constructing and performing non-heterosexual identities in a social context that demands conformity and discretion. By employing a qualitative feminist methodology and theoretical frameworks including intersectionality, counterpublic theory, and digital self-presentation, the study demonstrates how queer digital practices allow women to reframe their identities, selectively disclose personal information, and curate online visibility in ways that contest dominant gender ideologies. Many participants reported using pseudonyms, coded visual markers (e.g., rainbows, “T/P/NL” labels), and platform-specific community features (such as livestreams and queer forums) to express solidarity and belonging while maintaining safety. The findings highlight how dating apps become sites of resistance and feminist agency within urban China, where offline public spaces for queer expression remain limited. These digital tools enable users to blur the boundaries between private and public identity, create emotional intimacy under constraints, and form local networks that extend beyond the romantic to the political. The paper concludes by arguing that digital queer spaces, when grounded in localized cultural practice, offer both refuge and resistance in a male-dominated society, and should be recognized as critical arenas of everyday activism.

Keywords: lesbian dating apps, digital identity, queer resistance, patriarchal norms, feminist methodology

1. Introduction

In contemporary China, lesbian-identifying women continue to live within a complex network of gendered expectations, state power, and cultural norms that privilege heterosexuality as the unquestioned ideal (Bao, 2020; Rofel, 2007). While urban centers such as Guangzhou are often assumed to be more tolerant than provincial towns or rural areas, the everyday experience of queer life remains marked by invisibility, negotiation, and constraint (Zhao, 2019). At the same time, China's rapid digitalization has opened alternative spaces for interaction and identity work—spaces that queer women learn to navigate with both creativity and caution (Chan, 2023).

1.1 Patriarchal Context and Technological Ambivalence

Gender and sexuality in China are shaped by a deeply rooted intersection of Confucian family values, compulsory reproduction, and the social reinforcement of “normal” womanhood (Rofel, 2007; Bao, 2020). For many lesbian women—especially those educated, mobile, and digitally literate—urban life provides new ways of living, yet does not erase the pressure to marry men, bear children, or remain silent in workplaces and families.

The digital sphere complicates this landscape further. Online platforms offer anonymity and connection, but also expose users to surveillance, moderation, and algorithmic ordering (Zhao, 2019; Chan, 2023). As feminist scholars have noted, the same technologies that enable marginalized subjects to speak can also discipline, categorize, and render them governable (Haraway, 1991; Papacharissi, 2015).

1.2 Dating Apps as Emerging Queer Infrastructures

Against this backdrop, lesbian-focused mobile applications such as The L, LesPark, and LesDo have emerged as crucial tools for everyday survival and self-expression. These apps are not simply social utilities; they function as improvised infrastructures for building community, shaping desire, and negotiating identity within constrained sociopolitical conditions (Duguay, 2017; Chan, 2023).

Within these platforms, users experiment with self-presentation—using pseudonyms, selective photos, emoji codes, subtle labels, or livestream communities—to carve out space for themselves in an environment that still demands discretion. What appears, at first glance, to be casual profile-building is often a form of coded signaling recognizable only to other queer women, allowing connection without overt declaration (Zhao, 2019).

1.3 Identity, Risk, and Digital Self-Presentation

For lesbian users in Guangzhou, self-representation is never a neutral act. Research on mediated self-presentation suggests that visibility on digital platforms is always entangled with risk, desirability, and legibility (Duguay, 2017). Many participants in this study described the need to continually balance visibility with protection, and authenticity with self-defense.

A carefully chosen image, a rainbow sticker, or a deliberately vague bio can all serve dual purposes: they attract queer recognition while minimizing exposure. These gestures are neither trivial nor apolitical; rather, they demonstrate how users actively contest heteronormative frameworks while operating inside platform and cultural constraints (Butler, 2004). The act of “being seen” thus becomes a negotiation rather than a declaration.

1.4 From Survival to Resistance: A Feminist Reading

This paper adopts a qualitative feminist methodology to examine these digital practices not merely as interpersonal strategies, but as subtle acts of resistance. Feminist scholarship has long emphasized that power is not only challenged through overt opposition, but also through everyday practices that rework norms from within (Butler, 2004; Ahmed, 2004).

Drawing on in-depth interviews and digital ethnography with fifteen lesbian-identified participants in Guangzhou, this study reads dating app behaviors as everyday feminist gestures—situated, embodied, and deeply local. Users do not openly defy dominant gender norms; instead, they work around them, reconfiguring what is possible in the spaces between hyper-visibility and erasure. In this sense, digital intimacy becomes political: it creates room for queer women to exist without permission.

1.5 Theoretical Orientation and Contribution

This analysis is informed by intersectionality, digital counterpublic theory, and scholarship on mediated self-presentation. Warner's (2002) concept of counterpublics is particularly useful for understanding how lesbian users form affective and discursive spaces that exist alongside—but not fully within—dominant publics.

Approaching dating apps as affective and political spaces (Papacharissi, 2015), this paper argues that lesbian users in Guangzhou are not passive consumers of technology. Instead, they actively shape these platforms into provisional sites of belonging—where emotional support, identity recognition, and quiet resistance take place. By foregrounding the perspectives of queer women, this study contributes to ongoing conversations in feminist media studies, digital ethnography, and queer Sinophone scholarship, demonstrating how digital platforms can serve as tools of agency even under patriarchal constraint.

2 Literature Review

Research on queer digital cultures, feminist media theory, and sexuality in contemporary China provides crucial context for understanding how lesbian-identifying women engage with dating applications (Bao, 2020; Rofel, 2007). This section expands the conceptual terrain by incorporating feminist theories of mediation, China-focused scholarship on platform governance and queer subcultures, and recent post-2020 research on algorithmic visibility within Chinese mobile ecosystems (Chan, 2023; Sun, 2023). Together, these bodies of work illuminate how digital lesbian spaces in Guangzhou are shaped by the interplay of sociopolitical constraints, commercial logics, and users' everyday negotiation of identity.

2.1 Feminist Theories of Technology, Mediation, and Identity

Feminist media theory has long emphasized that digital technologies actively shape, rather than merely transmit, gendered subjectivities (Haraway, 1991; Papacharissi, 2015). Haraway's (1991) vision of the cyborg invites scholars to examine how digital platforms destabilize traditional boundaries—public/private, body/interface, self/other—while simultaneously reproducing power relations.

Later feminist scholarship conceptualizes digital environments as affective landscapes where pleasure, risk, desire, and anxiety circulate simultaneously, particularly for marginalized users (Paasonen, 2011; Gajjala, 2014). These perspectives highlight how mediated intimacy is never purely expressive, but always structured by technological affordances and cultural power.

Such scholarship is particularly relevant for analyzing lesbian dating apps in urban China, where women engage with platforms under layered constraints: patriarchal family norms, platform surveillance, and the emotional demands of curated self-presentation (Bao, 2020; Zhao, 2019). The feminist insight that digital mediation reshapes the terms of intimacy and selfhood is therefore central to understanding how queer women navigate technologies that both enable expression and impose new forms of regulation.

2.2 Queer Life, Visibility, and Platform Governance in Digital China

A growing body of China-focused research—both English-language and Chinese-language—demonstrates that queer life unfolds within shifting terrains of semi-tolerance, ambivalent recognition, and episodic censorship (Rofel, 2007; Engebretsen, 2014). Scholars such as Bao (2020) and Rofel (2007) document how queer individuals rarely reject dominant norms outright; instead, they adopt pragmatic strategies that preserve family harmony while sustaining same-sex intimacy.

Since 2020, scholarship has increasingly turned to platform governance and algorithmic visibility in Chinese digital spaces. Studies of major platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu show that queer-related content is subject to opaque moderation practices prioritizing “mainstream values” and social stability (Sun, 2023; Zhang, 2021). As a result, LGBTQ+ posts may be down-ranked, temporarily hidden, or quietly removed, producing what scholars describe as controlled or conditional visibility (Zhao, 2019).

Research focusing specifically on lesbian communities further suggests that lesbian users face distinct forms of marginalization, including symbolic invisibility, masculinized stereotypes of “T” roles, and assumptions that lesbian desire is temporary or incomplete (Bao, 2020). Recent qualitative studies emphasize that lesbian-specific digital spaces function as compensatory infrastructures, offering connection and recognition in contexts where mainstream platforms provide limited visibility (Tang, 2022).

In Guangzhou—an urban center shaped by migration, linguistic diversity, and relatively flexible queer subcultures—this tension between openness and surveillance becomes particularly pronounced. Scholars increasingly describe such environments as semi-private digital ecosystems, where belonging is negotiated through discretion, shared codes, and low-key forms of recognition rather than overt declaration (Chan, 2023).

2.3 Dating Apps as Emotional, Algorithmic, and Sociotechnical Systems

Global scholarship on dating apps conceptualizes them as arenas of self-branding and affective labor, where users must balance authenticity with strategic presentation (Duguay, 2017; Ward, 2023). However, emerging China-focused research offers a more contextualized understanding of how domestic queer platforms structure desire and identity.

Post-2020 studies of lesbian and queer apps such as The L, LesPark, and Rela highlight three interrelated dynamics. First, algorithmic sorting mechanisms—including popularity rankings, proximity recommendations, and livestream engagement—tend to privilege users who conform to platform-preferred femininity, often marginalizing gender-nonconforming or nonbinary expressions (Liu, 2023). Second, platform moderation policies, framed in terms of “healthy” or “civilized” content, align closely with state-sanctioned norms, encouraging curated and non-confrontational queer visibility (Sun, 2023). Third, ethnographic research conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic shows that lesbian apps increasingly function as emotional infrastructures, providing companionship, informal care, and community continuity when offline queer spaces are inaccessible (Zhou, 2022).

Within this landscape, user profiles operate as more than tools for romantic matching. They become sites of identity experimentation, emotional archiving, and coded political expression that respond to both aesthetic expectations and algorithmic pressures.

2.4 Gaps This Study Addresses

Despite the rapid growth of research on queer digital cultures in China, several gaps remain. Much of the existing literature focuses on gay male experiences, youth subcultures in first-tier cities such as Beijing or Shanghai, or visible forms of LGBTQ+ activism (Engebretsen, 2014). Scholarship specifically centered on lesbian-identifying users—particularly those living in southern urban contexts such as Guangzhou—remains comparatively limited.

Moreover, few studies examine how post-2020 algorithmic governance and moderation practices directly shape lesbian self-presentation, emotional labor, and strategies of ambiguity. The everyday practices of coded resistance, strategic opacity, and digital survival among queer women therefore remain under-theorized. By addressing these gaps, this study contributes a localized, gender-specific account of how lesbian users navigate dating apps as both constrained and generative spaces.

3 Methods

This study draws upon a qualitative feminist research design that foregrounds lived experience, emotional nuance, and the situated knowledge of lesbian-identifying women in Guangzhou. Rather than treating dating app usage as a purely technological phenomenon, this approach recognizes it as embedded within systems of gender, stigma, social risk, and emotional navigation. A feminist interpretive framework therefore guides the analysis, centering users' self-understandings while examining how meaning is co-constructed through interfaces, symbols, affective cues, and silences.

3.1 Participant Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

Fifteen lesbian-identifying participants were recruited between 2023 and 2025 through multiple discreet channels to ensure both safety and diversity. Recruitment occurred via: encrypted LGBTQ+ WeChat groups; in-app community forums on The L and LesPark; referrals through queer friendship networks; and offline introductions in Guangzhou's informal queer social circles (e.g., cafés, art spaces, gender workshops).

Purposive and snowball sampling were combined to reach users with varied app practices and identity positions (T, P, H, or label-rejecting). Recruitment continued until data saturation was evident—defined as the point at which new interviews ceased to yield substantially new insights about self-presentation, risk management, or intimacy practices.

Participants ranged in age from early twenties to late thirties and represented diverse occupational backgrounds, including corporate workers, service employees, freelancers, educators, and creative professionals. All lived in or around Guangzhou, a city known for its relatively flexible queer subcultures compared to many other regions of China.

3.2 Interview Procedures and Translation

Interviews were conducted in Cantonese in settings chosen for safety and comfort—either encrypted voice calls, private apartments, or quiet cafés where participants felt secure. Each interview lasted 45–90 minutes and followed a semi-structured format to encourage open reflection on identity labels (e.g., T/P/H), visual self-presentation, emotional labor, and negotiations of safety and visibility.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Cantonese and then translated into English by the researcher, a native Cantonese speaker. To maintain linguistic accuracy, idiomatic expressions, jokes, and culturally embedded phrases were preserved through annotated translation, including bracketed notes where meaning risked being flattened. A second bilingual queer community member assisted with spot-checking translations to ensure conceptual fidelity without compromising participant safety.

3.3 Digital Ethnography

Alongside interviews, digital ethnography was conducted on The L, LesPark, and LesDo. This included observing: profile images and selfie conventions, emoji/emoji-sticker vocabularies, pseudonym patterns, livestream and chatroom interactions, interest-based queer groups, and norms of silence, lurking, and discreet signaling.

Screenshots were not collected to avoid any risk of traceability; instead, detailed field notes were written immediately after observation sessions.

3.4 Ethics and Protection Under Surveillance Conditions

Given China's sociopolitical environment—where queer content and digital activities may be monitored—strict ethical safeguards were implemented. These included: obtaining oral and written informed consent; assigning self-selected pseudonyms; deleting raw recordings after transcription; encrypting all transcripts and field notes; storing consent forms separately; avoiding any collection of real usernames, photos, or contact lists; never linking interviews to specific app accounts or geolocation data.

Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without explanation. Ethics approval was granted by the **Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of my university**.

3.5 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As a queer woman and culturally embedded researcher working across Guangzhou and Chiang Mai, I occupy a position that facilitated trust and empathetic dialogue. However, this insider positioning also required reflexive awareness. Throughout fieldwork, I maintained reflexive journals noting: how my own queer experiences shaped interview rapport; emotional responses to participants' narratives; the influence of shared cultural references; moments of over-identification or projection.

These reflections helped bracket assumptions and kept analysis grounded in participants' meanings, not researcher expectations.

3.6 Data Analysis, Coding Reliability, and Peer Debriefing

Data were analyzed through **inductive thematic coding**. After initial open coding, themes were refined through iterative rereading guided by the study's core questions:

1. How platforms constrain or enable resistance?
2. How self-commodification and self-presentation function?
3. How users negotiate digital/real identity boundaries?

To enhance analytic rigor, two strategies were used:

- **peer debriefing** with a fellow qualitative researcher familiar with gender and media studies (but not with participants), who reviewed emergent themes for coherence and reflexive bias;
- **cross-checking codes** after a two-week interval to assess internal consistency and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than shifting analytic preference.

Analytical attention extended beyond words to tone, hesitations, linguistic play, emoji usage, and moments of silence—elements central to understanding queer subjectivity in contexts shaped by stigma, surveillance, and emotional risk.

4 Results

The findings of this study reveal a multi-layered terrain in which lesbian-identifying users negotiate the contradictory logics of digital connection, social pressure, and self-representation. Three key themes emerged: the tension between empowerment and constraint on The L, the strategic production of profiles as a form of self-commodification, and the ongoing negotiation between digital presence and offline realities. Together, these themes uncover how lesbian users in Guangzhou make use of dating platforms while navigating cultural stigma, gender norms, and emotional risk. For more demographic information of the participants, please refer to Table 1:

Table 1: Participant demographics

Participants	Age	Occupation	District of Guangzhou	Status	Self-ascribed Label
Ice	34	Postgraduate student	Haizhu	In a relationship	T
Arcki	37	Office lady	Yuexiu	In a relationship	H
Vanessa	37	Freelancer	Liwan	Married	No label
Little K	34	Office lady	Tianhe	In a relationship	T
Choky	31	Manager	Yuexiu	In a relationship	H
Jiaxi	31	Supervisor	Yuexiu	In a relationship	H
ZY (Han Xiao)	28	Financial supervisor	Tianhe	Single	T
Kurt	37	copywriter and game designer	Tianhe	Single	No label
CA	31	Fitness coach	Liwan	Single	T
Sam	36	Interior designer	Panyu	Single	H
Tsuki	29	Postgraduate student	Huangpu	Single	H
Nico	27	Diving coach	Haizhu	In a relationship	No label
Haier	33	Freelancer	Zengcheng	Single	T
Carlos	37	Lawyer	Panyu	In a relationship	T

Participants	Age	Occupation	District of Guangzhou	Status	Self-ascribed Label
Jo	27	Operation manager	Baiyun	In a relationship	No label
Bear	31	Tour guide	Liwan	Single	H
Si Ye (四爷The 4 th Lord)	37	Transgendered NGOer	Baiyun	In a relationship	No label
Wolf	37	Manager	Haizhu	In a relationship	T
Chloe	39	Accountant	Liwan	Married	P
Jay	35	Postgraduate student	Liwan	In a relationship	T

4.1 Reinforcing or Resisting Norms on The L

Participants consistently described **The L** as an important space for same-sex connection—but not a neutral one. The app enables private intimacy, yet subtly reproduces classificatory systems that frame lesbian desire within constrained boundaries. Though the platform welcomes queer women, its interface design and community culture still privilege a binary vocabulary of identity: particularly the widely used **T / P / H** labels, which map masculinity–femininity dichotomies onto lesbian life.

For **Jiayi**, a 31-year-old supervisor, the app became the site of one of the most meaningful relationships in her life:

“I never reveal or talk about my sexuality at work... But through The L, I found Ding Ding. We’ve been together for ten years.”

For Jiayi, the app offered access to intimacy that would not have been possible in institutional or family environments. Yet she continues to minimize visibility: 1) pseudonyms instead of real names; 2) profile photos without her face; 3) no connection to other social media accounts

In this sense, **visibility is treated as a controlled resource**, not an identity to announce without hesitation.

ZY, on the other hand, articulated the commercial side of the platform:

“人就好似商品一样，都要贴上标签，等人拣你。”
(*People are like commodities, labeled to be chosen.*)

This critique reflects an awareness that The L is more than a queer refuge—it is also **an ecosystem shaped by market logic**, where desirability becomes a competitive framework. Users are pushed to adopt certain labels, appearances, or personality cues to become “readable” within the platform’s algorithmic rhythms. Thus, while The L enables queer connection, it simultaneously reinforces: 1) gendered expectations; 2) normative aesthetics; 3) hierarchies of desirability; 4) algorithmic visibility.

The app becomes a paradoxical space: **a platform for marginalized intimacy, yet governed by subtle patriarchal and neoliberal forces.**

4.2 Self-Commodification and Profile Performance

Across interviews, users described their profiles not as spontaneous self-expression, but as **carefully curated performances** shaped by expectations of attractiveness, curiosity, and emotional tone.

Kurt, a 37-year-old copywriter, explained:

“Nothing more than selfies and brief words about my hobbies... I want the picture to be ‘Me’ in a relaxed vibe, meanwhile I look cute.”

This balancing act—appearing casual while being strategically appealing—reflects a form of affective labor. The “real self” becomes something assembled through emotional tone, visual composition, and narrative hints. It is authenticity as a practiced skill.

Other participants described how certain elements—clean lighting, pets, coffee cups, aesthetic landscapes—become indirect ways to **signal lesbian identity** without stating it outright.

ZY deepened this critique:

“就好似开网店... 唔吸引人地唔点你。”

(It’s like running an online store—if you’re not attractive, people won’t click.)

This metaphor reflects: 1) digital self-branding; 2) attention economies; 3) the pressure to perform femininity or coolness; 4) the belief that meaning is constructed through visuals, not disclosures.

The “click” becomes a form of social validation—one that must be earned through imagery and emotional accessibility. Here, **self-commodification is not only economic**, but emotional.

What emerges is not deception, but **a relational performance** shaped by digital architecture. Profiles become narrative fragments where queer women **translate themselves into marketable form**, even while seeking connection beyond commerce.

4.3 Negotiating Online and Offline Selves

The final theme highlights how lesbian users move between digital and embodied contexts, continually making choices about disclosure, erasure, and self-protection.

For **Jiayi**, The L provides room to exist:

“I use a pseudonym and a photo that doesn’t reveal my face... these platforms give us space to exist authentically.”

Yet her “authenticity” is **not equal to full exposure**. It is **the authenticity of control** — one that recognizes identity as something lived in fragments.

Others shared how app use helped them **interpret their own feelings** more clearly.

Kurt described a kind of emotional self-recognition:

“It made me more aware of my identity.”

For her, app interaction acted as a mirror, affirming that her attraction to women was not temporary, accidental, or abnormal. The technology becomes an emotional catalyst.

In contrast, **ZY** described a strategy of disengaged presence:

“我经常潜水，好少send自己d相。”

(I often lurk and rarely send photos.)

She participates, but from a distance—always conscious that a digital step forward might have offline consequences.

For many participants, **app usage is a rehearsal for becoming — but never fully stepping into view.**

4.4 Summary

Taken together, these themes demonstrate that lesbian users of dating apps in Guangzhou are continually working within a **digital “double bind”**—where self-expression and self-protection must coexist. Their strategies are not failures of liberation — but **expressions of resilience**, formed at the intersection of patriarchy, digital power, and affective longing. The findings from this study reveal a layered and ambivalent digital reality in which lesbian users in Guangzhou are continually navigating, negotiating, and reworking the meanings of intimacy, belonging, and identity. Mobile dating applications are neither liberatory utopias nor purely oppressive digital systems. Instead, they occupy a space in-between: assisting users in crafting queer worlds while simultaneously exposing them to platform logics shaped by market forces, cultural expectations, and the residual power of the heteronormative state.

5 Implications

The findings of this study have significance far beyond documenting how lesbian-identifying women in Guangzhou use dating apps. They offer insights into the design of digital platforms, the responsibilities of community organizations, and the broader possibilities for cultivating safer and more inclusive queer digital publics in China. By examining how queer users mobilize strategies of ambiguity, careful visibility, and affective labor, this research highlights how dating apps can evolve into more supportive infrastructures—while also revealing where current design and governance practices fall short. This implications section outlines practical recommendations for platform designers, NGOs, and local organizers, while also considering how lessons from Guangzhou may apply to other cities and to bisexual, nonbinary, and gender-diverse users whose experiences often remain underrepresented.

5.1 For Platform Designers: Building Queer-Safe and Queer-Literate Systems

The data points to several ways in which app designers—especially on platforms like The L and LesPark—could create environments that better support lesbian, bisexual, and gender-diverse users.

5.1.1 Enhancing Safety Through Optional Layers of Anonymity

Participants’ reliance on pseudonyms, half-face photos, and ambiguous labels illustrates the need for **flexible privacy features**. Platforms could introduce options such as temporary profile modes, blurred-image defaults, time-limited photo sharing, or “stealth” browsing that hides online status. These design elements reflect how queer users actually navigate risk in China’s sociopolitical context.

5.1.2 Reducing Algorithmic Pressure to Perform Desirable Femininity

Current ranking systems reward “cute,” approachable, feminine-coded profiles. Designers can counter this by: de-emphasizing popularity metrics, offering nonbinary and non-gendered labels, promoting diverse role expressions (T, P, H, and beyond), rotating profile visibility randomly rather than strictly through engagement scores. In a word, such changes would reduce the neoliberal burden to perform glossy, socially legible femininity.

5.1.3 Increasing Transparency Around Content Moderation

Because queer users fear accidental exposure or algorithmic censorship, platforms should openly communicate how they moderate queer content, whether LGBTQ+ terms trigger filters, and who has access to user data. Even simple FAQ pages on privacy can reduce anxiety and foster trust.

5.2 For NGOs and Community Organizations: Strengthening Digital Support Networks

While platforms shape the technological terrain, NGOs and queer community groups play a crucial role in supporting safer engagement.

5.2.1 Offer Digital Literacy and Safety Workshops Tailored To Queer Chinese Contexts

Workshops can help users understand platform tracking, screenshot risks, location-sharing dangers, ways to identify fake accounts, strategies for reporting harassment discreetly. This kind of training is essential for younger users who rely heavily on dating apps for their first queer encounters.

5.2.2 Establish off-platform community channels

Because apps can feel transactional or surveilled, NGOs can provide parallel networks—WeChat book clubs, sports groups, mental health circles, film screenings—that extend the sense of belonging without requiring emotional performance or algorithmic visibility.

5.2.3 Create Bisexual- and Nonbinary-Inclusive Resources

Many lesbian platforms still assume binary role categories and exclude bisexual or gender-diverse individuals. NGOs can counter this by offering discussion spaces, informational materials, and peer-mentorship systems that validate fluid identities and showcase queer diversity beyond binary labels.

5.2.4 Collaborate with platform designers to set community standards.

NGOs can help articulate what safe queer spaces require—moderation policies that do not shame non-feminine users, clearer protocols for harassment reporting, and guidelines that discourage T/P stereotyping or appearance policing.

5.3 For Local Community Organizers: Sustaining Hybrid Queer Worlds

Grassroots organizers in Guangzhou can build on users' digital strategies to strengthen offline solidarity.

5.3.1 Host small, interest-based gatherings that echo app-based micro-publics

Participants often built intimacy through shared jokes, emoji culture, or specific hobbies. Organizers can replicate this by facilitating craft nights, reading groups, hiking trips, or Cantonese queer film discussions—small events that mirror the intimate, coded nature of digital interaction.

5.3.2 Support Relational Care Networks that Supplement App-based Emotional Labor

Because users described exhaustion from constant self-curation, offline peer circles—especially for first-time daters or those navigating homophobic families—could provide non-commodified forms of emotional support.

5.3.3 Foster Cross-city and Regional Exchange

Given that Guangzhou's queer life often intersects with Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Macau, organizers can build inter-city coalitions. Exchange workshops, online forums, or Pride-adjacent cultural events can help expand users' possibilities for connection beyond the app.

5.4 Transferability Beyond Guangzhou: Bisexual, Nonbinary, and Gender-Diverse Users

While centered on Guangzhou, these findings resonate with digital queer practices across China—particularly in cities where formal queer spaces are limited and platform surveillance is normalized.

Bisexual women often experience erasure or suspicion on lesbian apps; the emphasis on strategic opacity and careful visibility applies directly to them, as they must negotiate misunderstanding from both heterosexual and lesbian communities.

Nonbinary and genderqueer users face challenges due to platform-imposed binary labels. The study's insights regarding ambiguous self-presentation and coded identity work are especially relevant for them.

Transmasculine and transfeminine users who participate in lesbian spaces navigate additional obstacles around safety, visibility, and role expectations. The study's emphasis on affective labor and conditional trust offers practical frameworks for supporting them.

Other Chinese cities—from Chengdu to Kunming—share similar patterns of semi-public, semi-monitored queer life. The platform recommendations above apply across many urban contexts where LGBTQ+ visibility remains tolerated but never fully safe.

5.5 Toward More Equitable Queer Digital Futures

Ultimately, the implications of this study call for a rethinking of both design and community practice. Dating apps should not merely replicate social hierarchies; they can become tools that affirm gender and sexual diversity, ease emotional labor, and enable solidarity across identities. NGOs and community organizers can create safer bridges between digital and offline queer life. And scholars and activists should continue to advocate for platform transparency, algorithmic fairness, and cultural literacy around queer experiences.

By illuminating the everyday strategies queer women use to craft livable space within digital ecosystems, this study offers a blueprint for building **more inclusive, safer, and emotionally sustainable queer digital futures—not only for lesbians in Guangzhou, but for diverse LGBTQ+ users across China and beyond.**

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