



Swiping Feelings: Emotional Labor and Queer Intimacy on Lesbian Dating Apps in Urban China

Qianting Huo

Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Abstract

This article examines how lesbian-identifying women in Guangzhou, China, perform emotional labor and cultivate queer intimacy through lesbian dating applications such as The L and LesPark. Drawing on post-structuralist feminist theory and affect studies, it explores how app-mediated intimacy operates within and against the forces of Chinese neoliberal modernity and patriarchal technoculture. Based on twenty semi-structured interviews and eighteen months of digital ethnography, the study reveals that app users engage in affective negotiation—investing emotional energy to maintain visibility, authenticity, and belonging in a landscape governed by algorithmic visibility and moral surveillance. The article introduces the concept of swiping feelings to describe how digital gestures such as liking, chatting, and profile curation constitute affective labor that reconfigures time, selfhood, and community for queer women. In this hybrid emotional economy, pleasure and exhaustion coexist: the same interfaces that promise intimacy also reproduce emotional inequalities and the commodification of desire. By situating Guangzhou's lesbian app culture within global discourses on affective capitalism and queer temporality, the study contributes to feminist media scholarship on how emotional work, mediated desire, and everyday negotiation reshape intimacy in post-socialist digital societies.

Keywords: emotional labor, queer intimacy, affect, digital culture, urban China, lesbian dating apps

1. Introduction

In the warm light of a late Guangzhou evening, “Chloe,” a 29-year-old designer, sits scrolling through *The L*, a lesbian dating app popular among urban women. She hesitates before sending a voice message to another user she has been chatting with for weeks:

“Sometimes I feel like I’m selling a version of myself,”

she tells me later,

“but if I stop trying, no one sees me.”

Her words capture the ambivalence that defines the emotional terrain of queer digital life in contemporary China. For women like Chloe, digital platforms are both spaces of possibility and sites of exhaustion, where feelings are continuously produced, circulated, and consumed.

Over the last decade, mobile dating applications have reshaped how intimacy is imagined, sought, and maintained across urban China. As platforms such as *The L*, *LesPark*, and *Butterfly* proliferate, they promise connection in a society that still stigmatizes non-heteronormative desire. For lesbian-identifying women, these apps offer rare semi-private arenas to articulate longing, play with identity, and negotiate safety. Yet they also reproduce the logics of the attention economy: intimacy becomes quantifiable through likes, matches, and chat frequency; visibility is rewarded but always precarious. The promise of connection thus carries a cost—the constant emotional labor of being available, responsive, and engaging in order to remain seen.

While digital intimacy has been widely examined in Western contexts (Illouz, 2007; Duguay, 2017; Hobbs et al., 2019), scholarship has only recently begun to account for its gendered and regional variations in Asia. Within China's rapidly transforming digital economy, dating apps are embedded in a hybrid moral order that fuses neoliberal self-management with Confucian propriety (Ho & Blackwood, 2024; Yang, 2019). Users are expected to perform both individuality and respectability, crafting profiles that appear modern yet modest. For queer women, this negotiation is intensified by the continuing absence of legal recognition and the persistence of familial expectations surrounding heterosexual marriage. Emotional expression is thus not only personal but deeply political: to desire differently is to feel against the grain of the normative emotional order.

This article explores how Guangzhou's lesbian users navigate intimacy and emotion in digital environments structured by both platform capitalism and patriarchal morality. The analysis foregrounds *affective labor*—the emotional work required to sustain relationships, attention, and recognition online—and *queer temporality*, the non-linear rhythms of waiting, longing, and connection that emerge through app-mediated encounters. While global scholarship has traced the commodification of intimacy in digital contexts (Illouz, 2007; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018), less attention has been given to how queer women in non-Western settings experience this commodification as both burden and resource.

The case of Guangzhou—one of South China's most cosmopolitan yet culturally conservative cities—illuminates this ambivalence. Positioned adjacent Hong Kong and historically shaped by trans-regional flows of media, language, and commerce, Guangzhou's queer communities operate within what Shih (2013) calls *Sinophone modernity*: a hybrid cultural field where global queer symbols mingle with local idioms and affective norms. Here, digital platforms mediate not only desire but also moral belonging. For many lesbian users, “being seen” online means navigating between visibility and risk, between algorithmic exposure and social erasure. Apps thus become emotional infrastructures—technologies that organize feeling, care, and recognition within a constrained social landscape.

In urban China, where same-sex relationships remain socially sensitive despite the growth of queer consumer markets, lesbian dating apps operate within an ambivalent regime of visibility (Bao, 2020). Users are encouraged to express confidence and individuality—hallmarks of China's neoliberal modernity—yet they must do so within strict moral and algorithmic constraints. The result is a form of *affective governance* (Papacharissi, 2010; Ahmed, 2014): emotions are both regulated by and resistant to the digital infrastructures that organize them. The act of swiping, liking, or chatting becomes a negotiation of how much self to disclose, how much affect to invest, and how to manage the exhaustion of being perpetually available.

This article introduces the term *swiping feelings* to capture this dual process. Swiping is not merely a technical gesture but an emotional performance—a negotiation between desire, risk, and social intelligibility. Each swipe contains the tension between exposure and concealment, between self-promotion and self-protection. Through such gestures, Guangzhou’s lesbian users translate private feelings into publicly legible forms, transforming their emotional labor into digital capital while simultaneously crafting micro-worlds of intimacy and care. The digital interface functions as both stage and shield: it allows users to experiment with affect while filtering potential harm.

By analyzing the affective dynamics of lesbian app use, this study seeks to contribute to three overlapping scholarly conversations. First, it extends feminist theories of affective labor (Hochschild, 1983; Hardt, 1999; Jarrett, 2016) into the realm of queer digital practices in East Asia, showing how emotional work underlies not only capitalist productivity but also the reproduction of social norms. Second, it builds on queer temporality studies (Halberstam, 2005; Freeman, 2010) to examine how digital intimacy reshapes experiences of time—how lesbian users dwell in intervals of waiting, anticipation, and partial connection that defy heteronormative life scripts. Third, it contributes to Sinophone feminist media scholarship (Leung, 2021; Chan et al., 2023) by highlighting how local linguistic, cultural, and moral contexts shape the politics of feeling in Chinese digital modernity.

Overall, the argument proceeds as follows. After reviewing existing literature on affective labor, queer temporality, and digital intimacy, I outline a qualitative methodology grounded in feminist ethnography and digital observation. The subsequent analysis presents empirical findings organized around three affective modalities—emotional availability, waiting, and care—that illuminate the affective infrastructures of queer digital life. The conclusion reflects on how *swiping feelings* names both a lived experience and an analytic framework for understanding intimacy under platform capitalism.

Ultimately, this article argues that lesbian dating apps in Guangzhou reveal the paradox of contemporary digital intimacy: the same technologies that commodify emotion also enable new forms of affective agency and community. Through emotional labor, users transform platforms of surveillance into spaces of connection, translating exhaustion into resilience. By situating these practices within feminist media theory, affect studies, and post-structuralist understandings of power, the paper shows how digital emotion becomes a site where neoliberal modernity, patriarchy, and queer resistance intertwine—an affective choreography that defines what it means to love, care, and endure in China’s mediated modernity.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

2.1 From Affective Labor to Affective Governance

Feminist accounts of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) and its diffusion into platformized life (Hardt, 1999; Jarrett, 2016) remain foundational for reading app-mediated intimacy. Recent work argues that platforms do not merely monetize attention; they **govern affect** through metrics, nudges, and moderation that shape how users feel, when they respond, and what kinds of tenderness become legible (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Within this regime, “authenticity” operates as both norm and commodity: the work of being “real” is an ongoing calibration to algorithms and audiences, an affective choreography that is feminized and unequally distributed (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007). My analysis extends this insight to Chinese lesbian apps, showing how *authenticity work* (softness, restraint, warmth) is demanded while overt anger, explicit desire, or politicized sentiment risks being filtered out.

Affect theory helps specify how these calibrations travel. Ahmed (2014) conceptualizes emotions as **circulating economies** that stick to bodies and signs; Berlant (2011) frames such circulation through *cruel optimism*, attachments that keep us near what wears us out. In digital dating, attachment to the promise of intimacy persists despite recurrent disappointment, producing cycles of anticipation and exhaustion that feel ordinary yet infrastructural. I conceptualize this as *swiping feelings*: the micro-labors through which users convert gestures (liking, pausing, waiting) into recognitions that sustain both intimacy and platforms.

2.2 Queer Temporality, Slow Immediacy

Queer time scholarship (Halberstam, 2005; Freeman, 2010) shifts attention from heteronormative life courses to rhythms of delay, hiatus, and sideways orientation. In app spaces, **asynchrony** becomes a moral-aesthetic code: quickness risks neediness; slowness can index care. Building on this, I frame **slow immediacy** as a South China-specific etiquette: a tempo that sustains closeness without exposure, aligning with Confucian restraint while deviating from friction-less platform speed. This temporal attunement is not simply coping; it is a tactic for redistributing the risks of visibility while crafting queer belonging in fragments.

2.3 Sinophone Modernity and Linguistic Opacity

Recent Sinophone media studies emphasize how regional languages and moralities inflect digital queer life (Shih, 2013; Chan et al., 2023). Guangzhou's lesbian publics move across Cantonese, Mandarin, and English, producing **linguistic opacity**: coded sentiment, double entendre, and tonal humor that enable *felt recognition* without explicit naming. Such opacity is protective in a climate of content moderation and moral surveillance; it is also aesthetically generative, allowing local affects (gentleness, playful restraint) to travel as queer signals. My approach reads these semiotics as **technologies of gender** and **technologies of the self** (de Lauretis, 1987; Foucault, 1980): practices that position subjects within overlapping regimes of Chinese modernity and platform capitalism.

2.4 Platform Capitalism: Governance, Gamification, Gifting

Contemporary debates move beyond “apps as markets” toward **apps as affective infrastructures** that govern value through visibility, gamification, and reward loops. Gifting systems (coins, badges, boosts), reputation dashboards, and “activity” labels turn care into currency, encouraging upbeat responsiveness and polite self-branding. These logics, well-documented across live-streaming and fandom, increasingly contour queer dating spaces through **soft gamification** that rewards relentless emotional availability while distributing costs unevenly (Terranova, 2000; Jarrett, 2016). I treat these mechanics as **affective governance**: design choices that set tempos for flirtation and norms of kindness, while quietly penalizing explicit politics or nonconforming affect.

2.5 Digital Intimacy After 2020: Crisis, Risk, Mental Health

Post-2020 scholarship demonstrates how overlapping crises—including the COVID-19 pandemic, intensified platform moderation, and shifting socio-political environments—have deepened reliance on mobile applications to sustain intimacy while simultaneously amplifying emotional ambivalence within queer communities. Recent studies highlight that increased engagement with dating apps and social platforms is associated with heightened stress, digital fatigue, and uneven well-being among sexual minorities, particularly where offline support networks remain limited. At the same time, scholars emphasize the emergence of micro-support practices—such as check-ins, meme sharing, and low-stakes conversation—that cultivate affective solidarity without formal institutional structures (Kaplan, 2021; Ho & Blackwood, 2024; Klausen, 2021).

2.6 Normalization, Risk, and Hyperpersonal Failure

A newer thread critiques the celebratory arc of “platform-enabled visibility,” showing how dating apps **normalize** narrow ideals (beauty, classed cosmopolitanism) while promising personalization. The emerging concept of **hyperpersonal failure** names the paradox whereby interfaces that heighten intimacy cues (profiles, photos, “compatibility”) also intensify mismatch, misreading, and ghosting, producing recurring “failures” that users metabolize as personal shortcomings. My findings translate this to Guangzhou’s lesbian scene: users internalize glitches and silences as deficits of self-presentation and then perform more affective labor to correct them—what I read as *optimization fatigue* under patriarchal technoculture.

2.7 Queer Publics, Anonymity, and “Small Feelings”

Work on **affective publics** (Papacharissi, 2015) and **digital intimate publics** argues that fragile, low-stakes ties—emoji replies, quiet encouragement—are politically salient, especially where overt advocacy is risky. In Chinese contexts, anonymity, ephemerality, and small-scale salons create **micro-counterpublics** that distribute care while avoiding algorithmic scrutiny. I extend this to lesbian dating apps: the tiniest exchanges (a heart, a delayed goodnight) do **world-making** work, sustaining everyday endurance. Such “small feelings” accumulate into *situated affect* (Haraway, 1991): a feminist, local practice of keeping one another afloat amid constrained futurities.

2.8 Positioning This Study

Bringing these debates together, I treat Guangzhou lesbian app use as **affective infra-politics**: ordinary emotional work that mediates between neoliberal self-branding and Confucian modesty, between algorithmic governance and queer durability. The contribution is threefold:

1. It theorizes **swiping feelings** as an analytic for platform-organized emotion that is simultaneously extractive and resistant;
2. It advances a **temporal** account—*slow immediacy*—that clarifies how queer intimacy unfolds in calibrated waiting rather than linear progression;
3. It grounds **Sinophone** specificity by showing how linguistic opacity and local moralities shape what counts as care, authenticity, and risk.

In doing so, the article reframes lesbian app culture not as a derivative of Western digital romance but as a **situated, affectively governed** practice of intimacy in China’s mediated modernity.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative design grounded in feminist ethnography and affective methodology to explore how lesbian users in Guangzhou navigate digital intimacy and emotional labor on dating applications. The approach is interpretive and relational rather than positivist, seeking to understand how feelings, gestures, and digital practices generate meaning under specific social and technological constraints. Following Haraway’s (1991) call for *situated knowledge*, the study privileges partial, embodied, and context-dependent understanding over claims of universality.

3.1 Research Design and Fieldwork Context

Fieldwork was conducted between January 2023 and May 2025 in Guangzhou, one of South China’s most diverse and media-saturated urban centers. The city’s proximity to Hong Kong and its strong Cantonese linguistic culture made it an ideal site for studying Sinophone queer digital life. Data collection combined **semi-structured interviews, participant observation,**

and **digital ethnography** on the lesbian dating applications *The L*, *LesPark*, and *Butterfly*. These three platforms were selected because they represent different temporal phases of China's queer app culture: *LesPark* as an early, community-oriented network; *The L* as a commercially branded, algorithm-driven interface; and *Butterfly* as a smaller space emphasizing privacy and friendship.

3.2 Participant Recruitment and Demographics

Twenty participants aged 22 to 39 were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Initial contacts were made via queer social groups on WeChat and in offline cafés popular among local WLW (women-loving-women) communities. Recruitment prioritized diversity in occupation, class background, and self-presentation (from *T* [tomboy/masculine-presenting] to *P* [femme] and *H* [neutral/mixed]). All participants identified as female or female-assigned non-binary individuals who were attracted to women. Pseudonyms—such as “Nico,” “Chloe,” “Bear,” “Wolf,” and “Little K”—are used throughout to ensure confidentiality.

Interviews were conducted primarily in Cantonese and Mandarin, lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and took place in semi-private cafés or through encrypted voice calls. Each conversation began with open prompts (“How did you start using this app?” “Can you describe an emotional experience you remember online?”) to encourage narrative reflection rather than short answers. Participants were compensated with small digital gift cards to acknowledge their time without turning the encounter into a transaction.

3.3 Digital Ethnography

In parallel, eighteen months of digital ethnography were undertaken across the public and semi-public sections of the apps. This included daily observation of feed posts, event promotions, user interactions, and interface changes. Posts were captured through screenshots and field notes rather than systematic scraping, in accordance with ethical guidelines on digital research in regulated environments. Private chats were analyzed only when both interlocutors granted explicit consent. Observations extended to related online spaces—WeChat groups, Xiaohongshu posts, and offline meet-ups—to map how digital affect flows across platforms.

3.4 Analytic Procedure

Analysis followed an inductive–deductive cycle using NVivo software. After transcription and translation, I conducted **open coding**, generating 60 initial codes around emotion words (e.g., “tired,” “hopeful,” “invisible”) and interactional practices (“waiting,” “deleting,” “liking”). Through iterative comparison, these were condensed into thematic clusters such as *emotional availability*, *temporal rhythms*, and *care practices*. **Focused coding** then linked empirical patterns to theoretical concepts drawn from affect studies and queer temporality.

In keeping with Ahmed's (2014) notion of affect as *orientation and movement*, the analysis treated emotions not as internal states but as *events*—forces that attach bodies, technologies, and norms. Each quote was examined for its affective force (what it does) rather than its psychological content (what it means). Attention was also given to silence, delay, or absence in conversation—moments where affect is felt precisely through withholding or waiting. Reflexive memos were written after each interview to capture emotional atmospheres and my own positional responses.

3.5 Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

As a queer woman and researcher who has also used some of the studied apps, my positionality provided insider familiarity but also emotional entanglement. Following Pillow (2003) and

Gilligan (1995), I practiced *reflexive accountability* by documenting how empathy, fatigue, and identification shaped interpretation. Field notes recorded not only what participants said but how I felt while listening, acknowledging that researcher affect is part of the data. This insider status facilitated trust—participants often emphasized, “You understand what I mean without explanation”—yet demanded vigilance against over-identification and ethical complacency.

3.6 Ethical Considerations and Data Security

Given China’s tightening digital regulation and sensitivity around LGBTQ topics, confidentiality and safety were paramount. All participants signed digital consent forms specifying their right to withdraw at any time. Real names, handles, and recognizable details were removed. Audio files were stored on encrypted drives, and only anonymized transcripts were used for analysis. To avoid algorithmic surveillance, recruitment messages avoided explicit sexual-identity keywords and employed neutral phrasing such as “research on mobile social life.”

Ethical approval was obtained from Chiang Mai University’s Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The study adhered to feminist ethics of care (Tronto, 1993), treating participants not as data sources but as collaborators in meaning-making. Follow-up messages after interviews checked participants’ comfort with quotations and offered opportunities to clarify or retract comments.

4. Results

Across interviews and online observations, Guangzhou’s lesbian app users described an emotional landscape marked by both promise and fatigue. Digital intimacy was rarely smooth or spontaneous; it required careful emotional work to manage visibility, maintain conversation, and navigate expectation. The findings cluster into three interrelated themes: (1) performing emotional availability, (2) temporal rhythms of waiting and withdrawal, and (3) the ambivalent ethics of care in queer digital publics.

4.1 Performing Emotional Availability

On *The L* and *LesPark*, participants characterized self-presentation as a subtle balancing act between sincerity and control. “You can’t be too cold, or people think you’re not interested,” explained **Nico**, a 27-year-old diving coach. “But if you share too much, it looks desperate.” Like many others, she described carefully modulating tone and timing to appear approachable but self-possessed.

Profile images, emojis, and captioned selfies were central to this performance. Users spent hours adjusting filters or rewriting bios to achieve the “right feeling.” **Chloe**, an accountant in her thirties, showed me her profile, where a minimalist photo accompanied a quote: “*Stay soft.*” She laughed: “It’s not just a sentence—it’s a strategy. It tells others I’m kind but not weak.” The phrase functions affectively; it signals emotional literacy within a context that rewards self-control yet craves tenderness.

These practices exemplify what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls *authenticity work*—the production of emotional truth as a brand. On Chinese lesbian apps, authenticity becomes a currency within what participants call the “friendlier algorithm,” referring to platform filters that reward frequent interaction and photogenic presentation. As **Bear**, a 32-year-old IT worker, put it, “You have to look like you care, even if you’re tired.”

Performing care thus becomes a digital obligation: users continuously curate affect to remain visible. Yet this labor is not only imposed—it is also affectively creative. By staging warmth,

humor, or local slang, women craft micro-identities that resist both heteronormative invisibility and Westernized queer aesthetics. These affective performances are, as Ahmed (2014) might suggest, *orientation devices*: they align bodies and feelings toward possible connection, even within constraint.

4.2 Temporal Rhythms of Waiting and Withdrawal

A distinctive feature of participants' narratives was their sense of *temporal drag*—a looping rhythm of excitement, waiting, and emotional withdrawal. Many likened app use to an addictive cycle. “It’s like the tide,” said **Kurt**, a 37-year-old copywriter. “I talk to someone for a week, then nothing. I delete the app, reinstall it, and start again.”

This temporal rhythm reflects what Berlant (2011) calls *cruel optimism*: users remain attached to a mediated promise of intimacy that continually disappoints. The repetitive act of swiping reproduces both hope and exhaustion.

CA, a 31-year-old fitness coach, described checking the “Nearby” feed late at night:

“Sometimes I just want to see if anyone is there. Not to talk—just to feel not alone.”

The gesture itself—scrolling, refreshing, glancing—creates what Paasonen (2023) terms *affective resonance*: micro-movements of feeling that sustain connection even without dialogue.

Waiting on dating apps also has a moral dimension. In Chinese cultural scripts that prize moderation and patience, users interpret quick replies as impulsive, while delayed responses can imply emotional maturity. Thus, waiting becomes an emotional performance in itself. **Jay**, a postgraduate student, explained: “If she replies too fast, it feels like she wants too much. But if she disappears for days, I lose trust.” The ideal tempo is neither too fast nor too slow—it mirrors the Confucian virtue of *zhongyong* (the golden mean), reimagined as digital etiquette.

This calibrated temporality reveals how queer intimacy in China is mediated by conflicting moral logics: the neoliberal drive for instant gratification and the Confucian value of restraint. The lesbian app user must navigate both, producing what I term *slow immediacy*—a temporal mode that sustains anticipation while avoiding exposure. Waiting thus becomes not only affective but also ethical labor: an attempt to inhabit intimacy without violating social decorum.

4.3 Ambivalent Ethics of Care

Care circulated through the apps in fragmented yet meaningful ways. Participants spoke of comforting others during heartbreak, exchanging motivational memes, or checking on acquaintances after long silences. “Sometimes I talk to someone who’s sad even if I’m not interested romantically,” said **Wolf**, a 37-year-old manager. “Because I know what it feels like to be ignored.” Such interactions form what Papacharissi (2015) calls *affective publics*: loosely connected networks sustained by emotion rather than shared ideology. Within Guangzhou’s lesbian scene, care became a mode of survival amid precarious recognition. Users frequently offered reassurance to newcomers—“Don’t worry, you’ll find your people here”—transforming individual chats into micro-support systems.

Yet care was also a source of fatigue. **Little K**, a 34-year-old office worker, confessed: “I feel like a therapist sometimes. People dump their problems on me.” The burden of caring labor fell unevenly along gendered lines: participants identifying as “T” (tomboy) were expected to provide emotional stability, while “P” (femme) users were imagined as receivers of affection. Several resisted these expectations. **Si Ye**, a community organizer, noted: “Even in our own space, gender stereotypes repeat. We need to unlearn who gives and who takes care.”

These observations echo feminist critiques of emotional labor's gendered asymmetries (Hochschild, 1983; Gill & Orgad, 2018). On lesbian dating apps, however, such asymmetry is not simply replicated but re-worked. The digital interface distributes visibility unevenly—rewarding those who perform empathy and relational maintenance. Emotional generosity thus becomes both moral capital and algorithmic advantage, creating what I call a *care economy*: a system in which empathy functions simultaneously as ethical currency and digital commodity.

4.4 Emotional Exhaustion and Re-Imagination

Toward the end of interviews, many participants reflected on how their emotional relationship to apps had changed over time. Initial excitement often gave way to weariness, yet most continued using them. This persistence was not simply addiction but a **form of emotional adaptation**—learning to live with the paradox of mediated intimacy. **Haier** described it succinctly:

“I no longer expect big love there. I use it to see what kind of people exist, to remind myself I’m not the only one.”

Similarly, **Wolf** said that logging in became an act of self-affirmation:

“Even if I don’t talk to anyone, opening the app says, ‘I’m still here, still part of this world.’”

These reflections reveal that lesbian app use functions as **affective infrastructure**—a medium for maintaining existence rather than merely seeking relationships. The apps host small, repetitive gestures that accumulate into social belonging: posting a photo, liking a friend's update, or sending an emoji at midnight.

A number of younger participants, including **Jay** and **Carlos**, also spoke of creative uses of the apps: sharing poetry, designing digital stickers, or collaborating on queer art events. Through these activities, they reimaged the platforms as cultural commons rather than purely romantic arenas.

“We know the app wants traffic,”

Jay said,

“but we also use it to circulate our own emotions, our art. Maybe that’s also resistance.”

Their practices exemplify how emotional labor can be redirected into **affective world-making**, producing cultural visibility through everyday digital creativity.

4.5 Collective Patterns: Emotional Labor as Everyday Survival

When read together, participants' experiences illuminate a continuum between affective exploitation and affective resilience. Users perform emotional labor to be visible, but through that very labor they construct micro-worlds of belonging. Waiting becomes a temporal practice of care; care becomes both gift and burden; exhaustion transforms into quiet persistence.

While most participants expressed fatigue, none described their affective investments as meaningless. Instead, they located meaning precisely in the **ordinary maintenance** of connection. **Nico** reflected near the end of her interview:

“Maybe we’re not fighting the system, but we’re keeping each other company. That’s already something.”

Her statement encapsulates the ethos running through these narratives: digital intimacy as a form of endurance within constraint. Through ongoing emotional calibration, Guangzhou's lesbian users craft livable digital spaces under moral scrutiny and algorithmic control. Their everyday negotiations—half-visible, half-concealed—constitute a politics of feeling that neither celebrates nor rejects the digital, but *dwells in its ambivalence*.

5. Discussion

In an age when intimacy is increasingly mediated by algorithmic infrastructures, the affective negotiations observed in Guangzhou resonate globally. The compulsion to appear authentic yet controlled, available yet self-protective, mirrors broader emotional patterns in the attention economy. What distinguishes the Chinese lesbian case is how users transform this global condition through local ethics of restraint, mutual care, and linguistic subtlety. Their practices remind us that even within systems of surveillance and commercialization, emotional creativity persists as a mode of agency.

5.1 Emotional Economies and Queer Agency

The findings reveal that emotional labor on Guangzhou's lesbian dating apps operates through paradox: it is both coercive and enabling, exhausting and life-affirming. Users invest affective energy not only to attract partners but to maintain social existence within a society that offers few public outlets for queer intimacy. Their labor therefore performs a dual function: sustaining community while reproducing the capitalist logics of attention and self-branding.

5.2 Affective Capitalism and the Value of Feeling

Digital intimacy in China exemplifies what Illouz (2007) calls the *emotionalization of capitalism*—the commodification of feeling as a measure of social worth. In this economy, being emotionally articulate, responsive, and kind translates into visibility and desirability. Platforms such as *The L* reinforce this exchange by quantifying affection through likes, chat frequencies, and “active user” badges.

However, the participants' tactics—ironic humor, playful ambiguity, or strategic silence—illustrate a subtle resistance to total capture. By refusing constant availability, users reclaim fragments of autonomy within the affective marketplace. These micro-withdrawals resonate with Paasonen et al. (2019), who describe how ambivalence and disconnection can themselves be feminist strategies against platform compulsion.

Guangzhou's lesbian users thus transform commodified affect into *relational currency*: a way of sustaining connection that values empathy and care over efficiency. Even as they labor for attention, they carve emotional micro-spaces that exceed transactional logic—spaces where friendship, mentorship, or fleeting solidarity carry their own value.

5.3 Queer Temporality as Emotional Method

The temporal rhythms of lesbian app use—waiting, returning, lingering—invite rethinking of intimacy beyond linear progression. Rather than seeing delay as failure, participants transform waiting into a practice of emotional attunement. This temporal mode resonates with Halberstam's (2005) *queer time* and Freeman's (2010) *chrononormativity*: by decoupling intimacy from speed and outcome, users reimagine relationality as process rather than destination.

In Guangzhou, such temporal flexibility constitutes a quiet challenge to heteronormative futurity. When **Chloe** says, “We don't plan; we just feel,” she articulates an alternative

temporality grounded in present affect rather than future institution. Swiping becomes an experiment in what Berlant (2011) terms *ordinary affect*—the everyday negotiation of desire within structures that cannot fully contain it.

5.4 Digital Infrastructures of Emotion

Platform architectures play an active role in shaping emotional conduct. Algorithms privilege frequent engagement, nudging users toward constant affective productivity. Yet participants creatively reinterpret these cues: some post mood-based captions like “Taking a rest from chatting” as both self-care and subtle protest. Others migrate conversations to WeChat or offline gatherings, extending digital intimacy into embodied friendship.

These practices align with Gajjala’s (2004) *cyberfeminist negotiation*, where women repurpose technologies for relational autonomy. By bending algorithmic scripts to local norms of politeness, Guangzhou users exhibit *everyday resistance* (Scott, 1985): small, unheroic acts that preserve dignity within constraint. Emotional labor thus becomes not merely adaptation but quiet defiance—a re-writing of how feelings should circulate in patriarchal digital cultures.

5.5 Sinophone Specificity and Affective Translation

Finally, the study situates these affective practices within the Sinophone context of South China. Guangzhou’s linguistic hybridity—mixing Cantonese, Mandarin, and English—enables users to craft layered emotional codes. Emojis, slang, and tonal humor carry meanings legible only to insiders. As **Haier**, a freelancer, explained: “Sometimes I use a Cantonese phrase that sounds neutral but means something queer if you know it.” Such coded expressions constitute what Chan et al. (2023) calls *linguistic opacity*: a protective ambiguity that fosters intimacy through partial understanding.

This affective translation bridges global queer aesthetics and local cultural scripts, producing what Shih (2013) terms *Sinophone modernity*: modernity refracted through regional language and emotion. The micro-affects of Guangzhou’s digital lesbians—soft-femme selfies, bilingual wordplay, ironic tenderness—thus form part of a transregional affective circuit connecting South China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Within these circuits, emotional labor becomes a form of cultural mediation as well as self-representation.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the women who participated in this study for their trust, honesty, and generosity. By sharing their experiences of app use, intimacy, care, and emotional struggle, they made this research possible. Their reflections form the heart of this article and have shaped its arguments in meaningful ways. I am also grateful to those who offered academic encouragement and thoughtful feedback during the development of this paper. Their comments helped sharpen the conceptual focus and strengthen the overall direction of the study. My appreciation is further extended to the digital communities and social spaces that informed the ethnographic dimensions of this research and deepened my understanding of queer everyday life in urban China. Lastly, I acknowledge the support of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University for providing the academic setting in which this work was developed.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion (2nd ed.)*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.
- Bao, H. (2020). *Queer China: Lesbian and gay literature and visual culture under postsocialism*. Routledge.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Chan, L. S., Tan, J., & Cassidy, E. (2023). Queer cultures in digital Asia—Introduction. *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 2455–2462. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/21105>
- de Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of gender: Essays on theory, film, and fiction*. Indiana University Press.
- Duguay, S. (2017). Dressing up Cinderella: Interrogating authenticity claims on the mobile dating app Tinder. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(3), 351–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1168471>
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings*. Pantheon.
- Freeman, E. (2010). *Time binds: Queer temporalities, queer histories*. Duke University Press.
- Gajjala, R. (2004). *Cyber selves: Feminist ethnographies of South Asian women online*. AltaMira Press.
- Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Polity.
- Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2018). The amazing bounce-backable woman: Resilience and the psychological turn in neoliberalism. *Sociology*, 52(4), 701–718.
- Gilligan, C. (1995). Hearing the difference: Theorizing connection. *Hypatia*, 10(2), 120–127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1995.tb01374.x>
- Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. NYU Press.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. Routledge.
- Hardt, M. (1999). Affective labor. *Boundary 2*, 26(2), 89–100. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-26-2-89>
- Hobbs, M., Owen, S., & Gerber, L. (2019). Liquid love? Dating apps, sex, relationships and the digital transformation of intimacy. *Journal of Sociology*, 55(2), 271–287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783316662718>
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.
- Ho, M. H. S., & Blackwood, E. (2024). Queer Asias: Genders and sexualities across borders and boundaries. *Sexualities*, 27(1-2), 68-76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607221092153>
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Polity.
- Jarrett, K. (2016). *Feminism, labour and digital media: The digital housewife*. Routledge.
- Kaplan, D. (2021). Public intimacy in social media: The mass audience as a third party. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(4), 595–612. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443721991087>

- Klausen, H. B. (2021). The ambiguity of technology in ASMR experiences: Four types of intimacies and struggles in the user comments on YouTube. *Nordicom Review*, 42(S4), 124–136. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0045>
- Leung, H. H. (2021). *Queer Sinophone cultures and media*. Routledge.
- Paasonen, S. (2023). *Resonance: Affective rhythms in digital cultures*. MIT Press.
- Paasonen, S., Hillis, K., & Petit, M. (2019). *Mediated feelings: Affect, technology, and social media*. MIT Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2010). *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000060635>
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press.
- Shih, S.M. (2013). *Visuality and identity: Sinophone articulations across the Pacific*. University of California Press.
- Terranova, T. (2000). Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text*, 18(2), 33–58. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-18-2_63-33
- Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.
- Yang, Y. (2019). Bargaining with the state: The empowerment of Chinese sexual minorities/LGBT in the social media era. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28(118), 662–677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1557943>