


Chapter 68

Transformation of China's Most Popular Dating App, Momo, and Its Impact on Young Adult Sexuality: A Critical Social Construction of Technology Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores China's most popular dating app 'Momo' and its impact on young adult sexuality. It examines three interrelated questions at three different levels: First, at the macro level, in what social situations and institutions were mobile dating apps such as Momo invented in China? Second, at the meso level, if we consider Momo as a constantly changing social process, what are the transformations it has experienced, and, during this process, what societal forces have impacted the trajectory of changes and in what ways? Third, at the micro level, how the transformation of Momo's 'intimate infrastructures' at different developmental stages has impacted the sexuality and intimate relationships of its young adult users? It argues that mobile dating apps have to timely transform their design, functions, and market positions to adapt to the changing market competition and governmental regulations in China. The transformation of the intimate infrastructures of the mobile dating apps has also shaped the young adult users' intimate practices and sexuality.

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INTRODUCTION

Technology has significantly transformed our emotional practices and intimate relationships – from love letters to telephone calls, from the use of the internet to the popularization of mobile phones. In China's increasingly digitized society, digital media becomes an important avenue for encountering, practicing and experimenting intimacy and love (Pei, 2010). The internet has been coded into Chinese people's intimate practices since China officially came online in 1994. In the early years of internet popularization, Chinese people used online forums, chat rooms and QQ (instant messaging) to experience intimate interactions. From 2000, dating websites, such as Jiayuan, Zhenai and Baihe, became more popular and professionalized and from 2010, the exponential growth of smartphone use, geolocation technologies and mobile apps encouraged the rapid emergence of mobile dating apps. These apps, such as Momo, Tantan and Blued, have significantly transformed young people's sexuality as well as China's traditional sexual culture and ideology.

In recent years, mobile dating apps have received increasing attention in everyday life and academic research around the world. In the US, 15% of adults have used online dating sites or mobile dating apps (Smith, 2016). In 2014, Momo, the Chinese version of Tinder, was listed on the Nasdaq, and by March 2019, had attracted 114 million active monthly users (Sina Finance, 2019). According to statistics released by iiMedia Research Group in June 2018, 55.82% of Momo users are male and 44.18% are female. Users under 24 years old, 25–30, 31–35, and 36–40 account for 38.34%, 31.34%, 14.22% and 7.41%, respectively of the total users (iiMedia, 2018). If we adopt the age range 18–35 to classify young adults (Petry, 2002), we can see that up to 70% of Momo users fall into this category. As China's most popular mobile dating app, the 'intimate infrastructures' (Liu 2016) Momo provides, and the transformation of the app, have greatly impacted the sexuality of Chinese young adults.

Existing research on mobile dating apps, mainly in the Western contexts, either studies the functions, features and formats of mobile dating apps (David & Cambre, 2016; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018), or explores how mobile dating apps are used by consumers, examining motives and self-representation (Chan, 2017; Wotipka & High, 2016). This body of research overemphasizes the 'intimate infrastructures' but neglects 'how these intimate infrastructures are produced and/or allowed and accepted' (Liu, 2016, p. 559). Therefore, it is timely and important to go beyond the dominant 'technology-consumption' framework to further study mobile dating apps from a production perspective and examine how the evolving product design of mobile dating apps has impacted the sexuality of their users.

To fill the gap, this chapter studies Momo with a production perspective, drawing upon the theoretical resources of social construction of technology (SCOT) that we will detail in the next section. More specifically, it explores three interrelated questions. First, at the macro level, in what social situations and institutions were mobile dating apps such as Momo invented? Second, at the meso level, if we consider Momo as a constantly changing social process, what are the transformations it has experienced, and, during this process, what societal forces have impacted the trajectory of changes and in what ways? Third, at the micro level, how has the transformation of Momo's 'intimate infrastructures' at different developmental stages impacted the sexuality of its young adult users?

Social Construction of Technology (SCOT): An Analytical Framework

Technological determinism has impacted the discussion of relations between technologies and societies in different historical periods. Neither technological utopianism nor pessimism has sufficiently consid-

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