



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

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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: lesbian dating apps; emotional labor; queer intimacy; digital culture